Naming Rights and Naming Wrongs

An analysis of football fan communities and their evolving attitude towards stadium branding practices

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Abstract

Title:	*"Naming rights and naming wrongs - an analysis of football fan communities and their evolving attitude towards stadium branding practices"*
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Summary:	This study seeks to provide an up-to-date analysis of how fandom communities perceive the *stadium naming rights* phenomenon. In order to gather empirical material which includes both a hypothetical and a retrospective perspective, the research is comprised of two independent cases. Focus groups and semi-structured interviews were the selected data collection methods, while the empirical data was analysed through a combination of hermeneutics and a model developed by Richard Giulianotti (2002).

The research findings unveiled an evolving attitude towards the *stadium branding* practices – in general terms, the fandom presents a decreasing, but conditional, element of disapproval. In order for the community to cope with a sponsor-influenced home ground name, a *sponsor-stadium fit* is a main prerequisite which needs to be ensured. When this requirement is considered, the majority of the community would consent to adopting a coping stance, rather than actively resisting the *naming rights agreement*.

Despite the increasing element of acceptance, this research has discovered and developed certain elements which would be an unconditional resistance triggers - the concept of *topophilia* representing the strong notion of rejecting the possibility of a relocation, even when considering an infrastructural improvement.

Keywords*:	Stadium branding; naming rights; corporate sponsorship; authenticity; resistance triggers; anchoring theory; coping mechanism; topophilia; trade-off; sponsor-stadium fit

* Note: Keywords indicated with *italic* throughout the text

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1. Introduction

Are we a consumption-driven society? This fundamental question has been a topic of extensive and fiery discussion, which nowadays appears to be obsolete. An increasing number of scholars have shifted their attention towards topics which seek to evaluate the extent of which we, as a modern-day society, have welcomed hyper-commodification in our lives and whether this development came at the expense of *authenticity* (Sassatelli, 2007; Slack, 2014). As the discussion evolves, research work has put an emphasis on related questions, which unveil important observations connected to society's reaction to the commercialization phenomenon. For example, individuals may omit, *cope* or actively resist market influences through various mechanisms which have been studied by renown authors such as Ritzer (1996). Although the number of studies have grown exponentially, it is hard to assess the extent of which contextual influences impact the degree of commercialization and moreover affect consumer behaviours.

As Featherstone (2007) argues, post-modern fluidity has resulted in an increasingly detached relationship between individuals and their roots. Global mobility, freedom of labour and a varied workplace have made a tremendous impact in our world, however, the unquestionable benefits do have an associated cost. The unconditional links which are not subject to change or modification are diminishing, and as a result, individuals seek to identify elements which may ensure stability in times of never-ending change. Tversky and Kahneman's (1974) ground breaking research has studied and theorized namely this strive which resulted in their concept of *anchoring*. Drawing on their theory, and by creating a parallel with religious following, Percy and Taylor (1997) argue that football supporter communities are among the last remaining strongholds of dedicated affiliation – by pledging support, individuals create an unconditional bond with the *heritage* of the chosen team. The identity of the club is comprised of symbols which allow for this much-desired distinction – the name, colours and stadium have an intrinsic importance for the fandom. The home ground is an important element and the stadium name, in particular, is a sensitive aspect for the supporters since it is an intersecting point of the commercialization and the traditional values (Boyd, 2000).

The shifting meaning of the stadium name, once an element of commemoration, is an empirical example of the ongoing philosophical debate which revolves around the evolution from a modern to a postmodern world. Naumann and Hufner (1985) have voiced an opinion regarding the triggers, characteristics and effects from this transition. In their views, the postmodernist

world is constituted by three fundamental trends – social differentiation, secularization and individualization (Naumann & Hufner, 1985). Van Raaij draws on their work and claims that if "taken to its extreme, these trends lead to societal fragmentation, loss of identities and social structures" (1993, p.541). Since such development is characterized by an extensive negative connotation, individuals need to resort to certain techniques which would ensure the prevention of these undesired outcomes of extreme secularization. According to Tversky and Kahneman's (1974) aforementioned *anchoring theory*, this represents a cognitive bias which impacts the human brains' ability to follow certain cognitive patters and its tendency to *anchor* to certain symbols. This is manifested at its full extent when related to decision-making processes. In other words, in a state of radical and long-lasting change, the human brain tends to rely on certain symbols which ensure at least a partial feeling of stability in order to avoid the potential loss or distortion of identity or the possible discontinuation of societal structures. Over the past four decades, several scholars have challenged and eventually made modifications to Tversky and Kahneman's initial theory (1974), with the most notable one being published by Epley and Gilovich (2010). However, the *anchoring* bias theory still represents an important contribution, as it underlines the importance of totemic symbols which are strongly represented within the competitive sports and stadia domain.

Symbolism is particularly powerful in the context of an environment which is characterized by a high degree of personal dedication (Whitehead, 1985). Extensive adherence and degree of commitment are traits which are often considered as indicative when assessing the extent of the element of dedication. As Novak (1995) famously argued – there are strong parallels between religion, as an example of extreme and strict dedication, and sports, with football used as a specific example. Although it may be perceived as a bold and adventurous parallel at first, there has been a stream of research conducted where football fans are compared to religious followers. A popular example of such a comparable study was conducted by Percy and Taylor (1997) and closely relates to the symbolisms addressed by Tversky and Kahneman (1974). In their study, Percy and Taylor (1997) emphasize on the creation of certain rituals which are comprised of a number of symbols, also referred to as artefacts. Such elements are to be considered essential in the context of consumption, since they have a high degree of importance for the part-taking individuals.

In the context of sports, and football in particular, the stadium is the most sacred symbol which encompasses both the clubs' *heritage*, traditions and the element of home (Boyd, 2000). The

home ground represents the present and the past and, in the context of Tversky and Kahneman's theory (1974), it may be perceived as the most likely *anchor* for the fandom. Although there has been a string of research reflecting the developing consumerist facet of spectators, there is one essential element which has often remained neglected – namely the concept of home. This is problematic, since the element of home, being the most important symbol for the dedicated followers, is an essential indicator of the extent to which commercialization in sports may develop without negatively impacting the perceived *authenticity* (Boyd, 2000). This paper seeks to address the two dichotomies which illustrate the tensions between internal and external stakeholders alike. Firstly, clubs often struggle with striking the right balance between safeguarding the aforementioned *authenticity* and delivering robust performance, in an effort to satisfy their internal stakeholders – the spectators. They do so while making sure to present an attractive opportunity for sponsors, who represent the external stakeholder body. It is hard, if not impossible, to perform at a top level, while retaining a traditionalist approach in an increasingly monetarized sport. The second dichotomy illustrates the ongoing internal friction - whether the fandom should resist the tempting opportunity to cope with sacrificing part of its traditional aura or whether supporters should remain firm and commit to safeguarding the clubs' *authenticity* at any cost. In this scenario, the first option would improve the likelihood of a successful athletic performance which would, in turn, attract even more sponsors, while the latter option would result in fully safeguarding *authenticity* at the expense of a superior performance. In order to advance this discussion, this study's exploratory research reveals the attitudes of different categories of spectators and their attitudes towards *stadium naming practices* through both focus groups and individual interviews. In addition, a selection of relevant and valuable literature will be reviewed and opposed to each other, in order to fully represent the ongoing discussion regarding the consumerist facet of the fandom.

Richard Giulianotti is one of the most influential authors and stakeholders involved in the discussion concerning the ongoing commercialization of competitive sports and football in particular. His work, more specifically, his *"Supporters, Followers, Fans and Flâneurs"* model (2002), will be used as an analytical tool during the data analysis stage of the research, since it provides a comprehensive summary of the social dynamics which characterize the football fandom (Giulianotti, 2002). As such it provides a robust framework for the interpretation of the focus group and interview transcripts. Although Giulianotti clearly represents one of the literature streams, there is an alternative stream of research which objects to the claims of over-

arching consumerism among modern day fandom. There is criticism from a number of his peers, with Davis (2015) being the most notable one.

Boyd (2000) is another author which has influenced this paper, as he is among the first to dedicate scholarly attention to the element of home within the domain of competitive sports. Despite his efforts, the amount of research dedicated to the subject has been relatively scarce considering the importance of the symbol, especially since Boyd (2000) underlines its strong relation to the identity formation of the community. Therefore, in order to assist with this dispute, the main research purpose of this article is to make a theoretical contribution by expanding the scarce knowledge regarding the *topophilic* factor (*def.: the term topophilia, stemming from ancient Greek, means "love for a place",* Collins, n.d.a*)* and its symbolic importance among the fandom. In addition, this paper aims to address the possibility of arising resistance and the underlying reasons which might trigger these phenomena, may there be socio-cultural, economic or personal origin, since they have been neglected thus far. This is where the research aims to contribute – by understanding the importance of the home stadium's name among the different spectator categories. Lastly, the findings prove to be a relevant addition to the discussion not only in the context of football, but in any other comparable setting which include a dimension in which the element of home is presented.

Understanding whether there is a risk for a potential negative reaction from the fandom is an important subject to study, since within recent times the movement of consumers against big corporations and brands is a widespread phenomenon. This may also be related to football fans and their ideal expectations towards their clubs (Sassatelli, 2007). The term "consumer resistance" can be described, in economic terms, as the consumers' aversion to accept certain products or to expand these further changes in general (Collins, n.d.b). The specific type of resistance which will be addressed in this work is the protest of a community sharing a common interest against a particular change in their environment (Gabriel & Lang, 1995). Appadurai (1996) and Antony (2014) define *authenticity* as individual and distinguish characteristics a person or entity acquires through its cultural and social background or past experiences. The rise of resistance goes with the importance of remaining *authentic*.

When investigating the primary research topic, this article seeks to retain an understanding of the general context of the sponsorship agreements. Multinational companies have a history of seeking for efficient and long-lasting ways to connect with their consumers, through building up a credible image that allows for those relationships to be established (Kapferer, 2012). The

modern-day marketing and branding industry has reached unprecedented levels in its maturity, which provides companies with a wide range of opportunities in regard to customizing respective strategies (Shultz, 2016). *Corporate sponsorship* presents a number of specific channels – event management, celebrity endorsements and *naming rights*, to name a few. Although the first two alternatives have been well-anchored practices, stadium *naming rights* may be interpreted as one of the more recent developments in the branding toolkit, since they could not be "considered normal operational procedure until the early 1990s" (Clark, Cornwell & Pruitt, 2002, p.18).

Thus, the main topic of the study may be perceived as highly relevant and academically underdeveloped. It merits more dedicated scholarly attention since it embeds both the recent trend of obtaining *naming rights* of sports facilities, especially football stadia, while illustrating potential social-cultural factors which influence those practices. The paper builds on the specific emotionally-driven reactions of the most important resource behind competitive sports – namely the spectators. Previous research conducted by Eddy (2014) and Woisetschläger, Haselhoff and Backhaus (2014) has already addressed the topic of the potential consumer-fan resistance element and the importance of the *authenticity* fragment, but unlike their scope, the aim of this research is to unveil the underlying fandom attitudes towards the home stadium name and explore potential reactions to a prospective branding through an inductive approach. Therefore, the two main research questions are formulated as follows:

1) Now that more stadia have been or are about to be branded by corporations, how do spectators perceive naming rights agreements in regard to safeguarding the authentic home?

2) Which are the specific triggers for resistance within the fandom?

After transcribing and analysing the gathered empirical data, the paper illustrates how these findings relate to the existing discussion and suggest ideas for further research. In order to answer these questions, this article addresses potential implications to the theoretical, social and practical domains.

Firstly, the relevant theoretical concepts will be assessed and divided into two main literature streams. The main difference between both streams is the notion, which Giulianotti (2002) supports and Davis (2015) opposes, that all supporters are consumers, regardless of their specific category belonging. Secondly, the paper seeks to evaluate degree of potential resistance to *stadium naming practices*. Following Giulianotti's (2002) proposed taxonomy, the research

aims to gather empirical information for all relevant categories through two independent cases characterized by different socio-cultural backgrounds. The main findings of the focus groups will be addressed in detail during the one-on-one interviews, however the interviews are not intended as a validation process, but rather a secondary way of collecting valuable empirical material. Finally, the outcome of the paper may be perceived as a relevant contribution to the discussion within the consumer culture domain, since it allows for a more detailed understanding of each spectator category's attitudes towards commercialization. As the *topophilic* factor has not been addressed within this context, the expanded profile allows for further research of the potential link between the loss of *authenticity* and dissolution from the home club. Last but not least, the paper provides food for thought for corporate sponsors, football clubs and fans, as it highlights ongoing tensions within the supporter communities – both internal and external, while providing suggestions for further optimization of the sponsor-fan community relationship. This is particularly relevant, as most naming agreements have a fixed term and these findings may assist with the decision-making concerning future collaboration.

In sum, the importance of *anchor symbols*, such as the home stadium, are becoming more important due to the state of constant change which characterizes modern day society. Increased mobility and globalization have led to a more detached lifestyle, where individuals have fewer connections with their roots (Appadurai, 1996). As Dionisio, Leal and Moutinho (2008) argue, football is one of the last remaining strongholds of the tribal communities – an environment in which traditions, local communities and symbols retain their utmost importance. Therefore, the study seeks to add to the scarce knowledge around the specific importance of *topophilia* by addressing the fandom attitudes towards potential *stadium branding* activities and their potential interference with the perceived *authenticity*.

2. *Literature Review*

Two main research streams have addressed the aforementioned phenomenon of increasing commercialization in professional sports and football in particular. The focal points of these discussions may be summarized by two main dichotomies – increasing degree of commercialization at the expense of *authenticity* and the opposition between potential *resistance and coping*.

Firstly, in the context of modern football, commerciality may be interpreted as a direct opposition of *authenticity,* since the objects which are being monetarized are often a fundamental part of the clubs' *heritage* (Boyd, 2000). As in the case of this research paper – it is a purely financially driven transaction since a traditional stadium name, usually linked to either the specific location or the community, is sold in exchange for lucrative sponsorship contracts. Another example which illustrates a more moderate exchange is the scenario in which teams sell advertising space on the clubs' shirts. This leads to an improved financial result with a relatively small impact on *authenticity* – shirt design is changed on an annual basis and as such does not provide the *anchoring effect* which may be associated with stadium renaming. It may be assumed that this more restricted sponsorship agreements are widely accepted by the fandom since, unlike with case with stadium renaming agreements, there have not been any major objections to this phenomenon. Therefore, it may be concluded that these two examples illustrate the different degrees of commodification which may be observed within the domain.

Secondly, the opposition between the potential fandom resistance and potential *coping* processes have been widely addressed within the domain, with Woisetschläger, Haselhoff and Backhaus (2014) presenting a notable contribution. Although understanding how certain spectator categories would react is not the focal point of this research, the paper seeks to unveil what are the main triggers behind a potential act of resistance. The underlying reasons may be considered as an important finding, since they are the backbone of the theoretical and the practical contributions of this research.

Although the two dichotomies have added a significant amount of relevant knowledge, they both fail to address the major importance of the element of home. Due to its *anchoring nature*, the stadium is the main link between the club and its fandom (Boyd, 2000). Therefore, the theoretical framework seeks to provide an in-depth representation of the *topophilic* importance in regard to preserving club *authenticity* in order to fill the currently existing research gap.

In sum, the research seeks to address the two dichotomies which have a strong link with the main research questions – namely how are the different categories of spectators likely to perceive *stadium naming agreements* and *which are the specific resistance triggers* among the fandom. The opposition pairs would effectively structure the papers' contribution – both in regard to advancing the aforementioned ongoing consumer culture theory (CCT) discussion and the practical implications outlined in a following section of the article. By introducing the additional and often neglected concept of *topophilia* in the theoretical framework, through investigating behaviours, opinions and beliefs, the paper seeks to provide a more extensive and in-depth understanding of the perception of stadium *naming rights agreements*.

2.1 Authenticity & Commercialization

The phenomenon of commercialization spread in various directions and influenced changes in consumer behaviour. A loss in valuing objects is one main issue which stems from the commodification processes (Sassatelli, 2007). Appadurai (1996) declares that with the abundant amount of goods, *authenticity* plays a crucial role in sensitizing people to value belongings again. For example, in other influential industries, such as art, products can become a commodity if the authors' personal mark becomes visible (Sassatelli, 2007). This represents one case in which through the process of social self-creation may eradicate the associated *authenticity* (Miller, 1994). A similar development may also be noticed in the music industry, where commercialization tends to lead to the loss of intimate scenes and inherent worldviews. Even independent record companies - the last forms of making liberated, creative and anti-authoritarian music – started to promote musicians to a larger audience in order to reinforce their quest for further profit. The grunge sub-culture may be referred to as one of the well-known and rather extreme examples of unwelcomed commercialization. Although fans of this music subculture are known to be committed critics of the mainstream facets of modern day society, there were a number of tendencies which indicated an inclination towards commercialization. As a result, recognizable artists have attempted to counteract by promoting producer independence (Horsfall, 2013). Therefore, the two brief examples above illustrate the wider span of this phenomenon as it engulfs an area much larger than modern football alone.

Within the context of sports, and football, in particular, the extent to which commercialization has penetrated the community has been a target of scholarly attention. As an example of the

ongoing discussion within the domain, the paper seeks to address the dispute between Giulianotti (2002) and Davis (2015) which revolves around the discussion regarding whether modern day spectators are inherently representing consumerist characteristics. The discussion has been particularly fierce, as football has been traditionally associated with strong sentiments of localism and masculinity (Hopcraft, 1968). In parallel, the link between the evolution of modern football and the development of a consumption-driven society needs to be addressed. This is a relevant consideration since the superior athletic performance, for example, tends to be a trigger for a share of the fandom in their decision to cope with stadium *naming rights agreements*. Therefore, the consumer expectations prior to attending a football game, or prior to opting for pay-per-view television access, have important implications on the way which football, as a commodity, is being packaged and delivered to its viewers (Lasch, 1977). In his work, the author is critical and concludes that modern sport has grown to be dependent on the mass society and in his views "unappreciative and ignorant fan communities" are the real trigger behind the corruption of modern day sport (Lasch, 1977). Drawing on his work, Hughes and Coakley (1984) are in agreement and argue that sport has become a victim of its own popularity.

In relation to the commercialization of the sport and, most importantly, the stadia facilities, there is an apparent trend towards hyper-commodification (Giulianotti, 2002). The traditional open terraces which characterized the stadia landscape in the 70's, 80's and 90's were slowly exchanged for all-seater facilities. Some would rightfully argue that this came as a result of safety issues and concerns which were triggered by the Hillsborough tragedy which occurred in 1989 (Davis, 2015). Although there is certain merit to these claims, Giulianotti (2002) argues that this is only a part of a more substantial change which was pushed through by English professional football clubs. His views tend to be reinforced by the recent infrastructural development of the modern day stadia – organized tours, restaurants, hotels and shopping areas on the premises of the sports arenas are frequently seen throughout the European continent. And as Jensen and Butler (2007) conclude, not all spectators are ready to openly accept this developing commercialization facet.

2.2   Resistance & Coping

The term resistance represents the human element of opposing a dominant force, which is widely associated with a rejection to accommodate an ongoing change (Roux, 2007). When

seeking to build a general understanding of the phenomenon, it is important to highlight that this task requires an approach which is significantly different when compared to the general consumer culture theory. Unlike most research tracks within the field of CCT, which seek to highlight the underlying reasons for individuals to part take in consumption, anti-consumption puts an emphasis on ones' motivations to avoid consumption at a whole. Since there is a wide range of driving forces, which might initiate the process of resistance, different authors have engaged in dedicated research in order to differentiate the various ways of potential opposition.

The different classifications of resistance differ in both their root cause, which triggers the opposition process, but also in the way in which the reluctance to accommodate to the change is manifested. For example, Holt (2002) and Kozinets and Handelman (2004) are among the authors with the greatest contributions in regard to understanding the main elements of the anti-globalization and anti-capitalist movements. Although their contributions to the domain of consumer resistance are beyond any doubt, another stream of relevant resistance-focused research presents an intriguing dimension in regard to the two main questions. The research undertaken by Witkowski (2010) and previously by Friedman (1999) focuses on the triggers of political and religious-based boycotts. The latter is particularly relevant to this paper since it complements the previously drawn parallel between religion and football. While Percy and Taylor (1997) address the similarities between the importance of symbolism during participation in the rituals, in his book Friedman (1999) takes a more modern perspective and highlights the importance of appropriate marketplace and the media presence management, as a mean of mitigating the risk of arising resistance.

In addition to the fundamental resistance theories which can be applied to the selected phenomenon, there is a wide range of research which addresses the tensions in the specific domain of football fandom. In the context of international football, England and Italy may be perceived as flagship nations due to their long-standing traditions and rich history. As such, both nations have been approached as separate research objects by the works of Duke (2002) and Numerato (2015) respectively.

Firstly, Duke's *"Local Tradition Versus Globalisation: Resistance to the McDonaldisation and Disneyisation of Professional Football in England" (2002)* is an important publication since it addresses the tension between localist values and the increasing globalization trend. Most importantly, his work clearly identifies the need for further research of the phenomenon, since he believes that "there is a lack of fit between traditional fan culture and the more profit oriented

model of sport" (Duke, 2002, p.5). Another reason which illustrates the relevance of the article is its link to the well-known concepts of McDonaldization and Disneyization (Ritzer, 1996). An important element of Duke's conclusions is taken into consideration in the research formulation of this article – although not as clearly defined as in Giulianotti's model (2002), Duke (2002) does indicate that the trigger points of fandom dissatisfaction are linked to deeply enrooted values which, in turn, are shared by certain elements of the community. Thus, his findings present an important additional to the domain since they provide a vivid illustration of the tension which exists between maintaining traditional values and participating in the commercialized environment of todays' modern football.

Secondly, Numerato (2015) has reinforced the additional notion of resistance to modern football, but unlike his peers, he is including neo-liberalism as a factor which might explain certain tendencies when assessing the feelings and actions of certain segments among the fandom. In other words, Numerato (2015) has a similar approach as this research paper – by looking at a wider, more overarching topic, the author investigates the attitudes towards the neo-liberal values and uses the Italian football spectators and their reactions as a specific empirical phenomenon. Dino Numerato's (2015) efforts provide another important validation of the importance of this papers' research subject. He also rules out any possible objection which would address the fandom resistance to one specific region or culture. His findings provide a valuable addition to the domain since in his paper, Numerato (2015) focuses on a specific term ("Against Modern Football") in order to represent a wider phenomenon. While his work is primarily addressing the resistance element and, more specifically, the different types of resistance through the aforementioned slogan, this research uses the home ground symbol in order to depict general attitudes toward the *authentic* nature of the clubs.

In addition to the specific single-country scope of Duke (2002) and Numerato (2015), there is another stream of resistance-based literature which is highly relevant in the context of this research. Bale (1993), Cleland (2010) and Dionisio, Leal and Moutinho (2008) all address a general tendency of an evolving relationship between clubs and their fandom. Their main findings present an important addition to the discussion due to the extensive development and profile-building of the tribal nature of the fandom community. Their findings are particularly relevant for the section of this paper which refers to the *stadium-sponsor fit*, since they provide a deeper understanding of a phenomenon which is highly connected to this papers' second research question.

John Bale's *"The Spatial Development of the Modern Stadium"* (1993) presents a slightly outdated, however still relevant perspective into the increasing importance of the home ground in relation to the spectator experience. Ultimately, through the enhanced and innovative for its time depiction of the new stadium and its functions, the author presents a set of important findings which illustrate the evolving relationship between the club and its spectators. Within the context of this work, the research will be able to contribute by providing a more up-to-date empirical material through investigating the underlying beliefs of modern day spectators. By moderating a focus group almost 20 years following his publication, the generated findings unveil the evolution of the phenomenon at hand. In other words, and as suggested within the title of this article, this research seeks to understand which features of that relationship have remained relevant and which elements have gradually faded away. Similarly to Bale (1993), this paper maintains the emphasis on the link between the fandom and the club.

In turn, this is the core emphasis of Jamie Cleland's *"From passive to active: the changing relationship between supporters and football clubs" (2010)*. The author introduces the integration of the fandom within the club structure, as a mean of facilitating the evolving relationship and mitigating the risk of a potential push-back against single-handed decision-making. His research clearly outlines that the selected approach has a major influence on the likelihood of a successful integration. In simpler terms, clubs which ensured two-way communication demonstrated a more positive perception among their fandom. Cleland's (2010) observations are gathered through 4 different clubs, however, his findings are in contraction with some of the empirical material presented by Numerato (2015). In some specific contexts, certain segments of the fandom do not believe in formal affiliation with the club structure. These fractions, referred to as ultras, perceive themselves as an independent entity with a corrective function (Numerato, 2015). In other words, integration within the club would result in co-dependency and a bias towards assessing the motives behind each decision.

These findings present an important consideration which is to be taken in account prior to the collection of the empirical material. Exploring whether there is a degree of integration between the fandom and the club is an important consideration, as it might have an effect on how potential sponsorship agreements are perceived. Only certain categories of more committed spectators would be subject to this integration due to their committed relationship with the club.

In sum, despite providing extensive insight into specific facets of the commercialization factor, the two existing literature streams have omitted to develop the concept of *topophilia*, despite

its symbolic importance as an *anchor* for the fandom. Therefore, the research seeks to extend the direction which was initiated by Boyd (2000) and develop the concept through an extensive empirical data collection process. In addition, in order to benefit from the gathered knowledge from previous research, the findings of this study will be generated through the application of analytical tools which are based on some of the flagship literature works in the domain.

3.   *Theoretical Framework*

In order to advance the discussion regarding the element of commercialization, we seek to develop a robust theoretical framework, comprised of three main elements, which complements the findings of the empirical research. Through the concepts of *topophilia*, *sanctity of the anchor symbol*, namely the stadium, and Giulianotti's model (2002), the framework will present an addition to the ongoing discussion concerning the commercialization of the element of home.

Firstly, Giulianotti's model (2002) is used as a starting point of the data analysis of the inductively gathered material. The taxonomies developed in this paper provide an extensive and well-argued distinction between the different types of spectators. As a result, the matrix is perceived as a valuable foundation of the analytical method. Since the collected empirical information will be processed through the model, the article includes a reflective element in the final chapter. Also, in order to link the "*Supporters, Followers, Fans and Flâneurs*" matrix to the specific domain of *topophilia*, certain spectator characteristics are transposed in order to develop an additional dimension which addresses the attitudes towards the home ground.

This, in turn, will allow for a strengthened effort of developing and introducing the *topophilic* factor into the discussion which concerns the ongoing commercialization of modern football. The mixture of a robust theoretical framework and systematically analysed empirical material is intended as a process of adding credibility to the research findings.

In addition to the previously addressed importance of the home ground, the concept is further reinforced by drawing on notable work from Douglas (1966) and Belk, Wallendorf and Sherry (1989). The football-religion parallel comparison, initiated through renown publications by Novak (1995) and Percy and Taylor (1997), introduces the sacred versus profane dichotomy and the concept of *symbolic purity*. By interconnecting the two research streams, the article extends the specific knowledge within the modern sports domain through a combination of a solid theoretical background coupled with insightful empirical findings.

3.1   *"Supporters, Followers, Fans, and Flâneurs" Model*

Giulianotti's influential paper *"Supporters, Followers, Fans, and Flâneurs: A Taxonomy of Spectator Identities in Football" (2002)* is a pivotal work which has provided a structured

overview and has categorized the different spectator taxonomies among football spectators. By introducing a model which aims to illustrate the degree of solidarity, either thick or thin, and the spectator identity, traditionalist or consumerist, the paper classifies spectators into four different categories – *"Supporters", "Followers", "Fans" and "Flâneurs"*. We perceive the model as an important analytical tool which is an essential element of the data analysis stage of the research.

Firstly, Giulianotti (2002) seeks to classify the different taxonomies along the "Cool – Hot" axis, which illustrates the level of fan attachment to the club. On one hand, impersonal means of communication, such as social media, are an example of a cool relations while, on the other hand, a hot relationship would be characterized by a physical, real, connection between the supporter and the club and its totemic symbols.

Secondly, the matrix seeks to differentiate between the traditionalist and consumerist mindsets, where the dichotomy is clearly related to a wider discussion on resistance to change and extreme commercialization. For traditionalists, the club is an integral part of the local customs and the community, while on the contrary, consumerists perceive the relationship with their preferred club as another mean of distinguishing their cosmopolite identity (Giulianotti, 2002).

As illustrated in Figure 1, each spectator category has a set of characteristics which clearly defines the attitude towards the broader discussion regarding the club *authenticity* or the lack of such. For example, "Supporters" and "Followers" are representing the traditionalists in Giulianotti's model (2002) and thus, the two groups have a deeper attachment to the historical aspect and the *heritage* of the club. On the contrary, the consumerist side of the model seeks a more instant gratification. Regardless of whether the relationship is assessed as either attached or distant, both "Fans" and "Flâneurs" seek immediate return from the emotional and material investment they make into the club. Namely this sense of urgency for instant success at any cost is often the cause for them being labelled as "glory hunters", a term with a clearly defined negative connotation in the context of the community (Sass, 2016).

	HOT	
	Supporter	**Fan**
TRADITIONAL	- Characterized by long-term commitment to the club -Thick personal solidarity and monetary support -Strong feeling of localism – club a representation of the community	-Modern fan, attract to either the club or certain celebrities -Thick or thin solidarity -Authentication through consumption of related products	**CONSUMER**
	Follower	**Flâneur**	
	-Explicit concern with senses of identity and community -Thin or thick form of solidarity -Identification through the medium of electronic media	-Detached relationship, dedicated to consumption -Thin form of solidarity -Authentication of cosmopolite identity through unfavourable representation of hot /traditional groups	
	COOL	

Figure 1: Summary of spectator characteristics (Giulianotti, 2002)

Thus, it may be argued that traditional and modern, consumption-driven, spectators have different definitions of being successful - on one hand, achieving solid results, while remaining true to the club identity, opposed to winning at any cost. That fundamental gap in the definition is what leads to certain tensions between the different categories. As addressed throughout the article, modern clubs tend to focus on attracting "Flâneur" fans, since they represent a more appealing economic opportunity. As a result of their bourgeois status and their higher disposable income, the more distant and consumption-driven category prices out the loyal fans, which are predominantly represented by the working class (Brick, 2000). In short, sports clubs are aware that there is an opportunity to offer more expensive tickets since there is a demand for that, as the "glory hunters" are able and willing to pay a higher price for admission (Sass, 2016). This increase in ticket prices leads to a more exclusive event, which effectively has a negative impact on the local community - many traditional fans are no longer able to keep up with the surge in prices (Brick, 2000).

This development, among others, unveils the tensions which exist between the different taxonomies of the supporters of a club. In order to capture and assess the relationships between the different spectator categories, Giulianotti (2002) also draws on Turner (1999), who

introduces a thick and thin metric assessing the form of social solidarity. In the context of the two axis', thick solidarity represents a combination of a hot and traditional affiliation, while thin solidarity is characterized by a combination of a cool and modern relationship. The model which Giulianotti has developed provides a robust starting point for further research and constitutes a fundamental influence on this paper. By collecting the empirical data through the focus groups and the interviews, we seek to introduce the additional, and highly relevant, dimension of the importance of home. Hence, our paper unveils how the different spectator categories are likely to object and, potentially, resist potential *naming rights agreements* of their home stadium.

As previously introduced in the literature review chapter, Giulianotti's work (2002) has been an object of criticism, as for example, Davis (2015) claims that his approach is failing to reflect the reflexive fluidity of fan communities. Davis (2015) goes on to argue that it is hard to assess what constitutes an "*authentic fan*", thus this is partly why he does not agree with Giulianotti's generalization that all fans are now consumers and that original era of fandom is now replaced by post-fandom. Although there is always a risk when dealing with large-scale generalization, Giulianotti's work still provides a robust and comprehensive way of providing a tangible understanding of the main characteristics behind the different categories of supporters. The author also dissects a number of factors which would determine whether the relationship between spectators and their club is either committed or semi-detached. Apart from his focus on the actual fans, Giulianotti elaborately investigates football clubs and their newfound appetite for a wealthier spectator base (Giulianotti, 2002).

In sum, due to its extensive coverage and the robust theoretical representation, Giulianotti's model (2002) represents a fundamental influence on the analysis and interpretation of our empirical material. After the completion and transcription of the focus group and interview material, the matrix was utilized in order to systematically analyse the findings of the inductive research. In effect, this allowed for an understanding of how the different categories of spectators perceive matters of *authenticity* and symbolic purity.

3.2   Protecting the Purity: Naming Rights Agreements and Profane Practices

Douglas (1966) provides an extensive interpretation of the importance of the system of symbols since, in her view, they form the unwritten but omnipresent rules which define what constitutes normality within the community. Within our specific empirical example, the stadium represents a distinctive and powerful symbol for football clubs since the facility represents the element of home. It also represents the specific location in which recurring ritualization takes place (Boyd, 2000). Since the most significant rituals, namely the football games, are an intersection between the regular maintenance of the beliefs and consumption practices, Belk, Wallendorf and Sherry (1989) argue that consumption is yet another mean of participating and experiencing the sacred. In addition, Douglas (1966) describes rituals as the habits which constitute the community. In her view, "rituals of purity and impurity create unity in experience" (Douglas, 1966, p.2). Namely those traditional activities together with the pollution taboos, which cleanse the society, have an important function. Those two elements together ensure the fixed presence of the genuine and sacred societal values.

Within their work, Belk, Wallendorf and Sherry (1989) list a number of specific properties of the aforementioned element of sacredness. Elements such as hierophany, or the act of manifestation of the sacred are evident within the specific phenomenon of attending football events (Belk, Wallendorf & Sherry, 1989). By visiting matches on a frequent basis, the spectators reaffirm and communicate their dedication to the community. Another important element which characterizes the example of hierophany is that it is not intended as an experience which is meant to be understood, or appreciated, by everybody (Belk, Wallendorf & Sherry, 1989). One of the reasons for this exclusivity is the fact that through their presence, the spectators engage in an activity which is "beyond individual creation". Thus, by attending in larger numbers, the fandom co-creates a ritual which reinforces the sacred element of the home.

These acts seek to create a unity of the experience, where the customs may be associated with either purity or dirt (Douglas, 1966). Within the scope of her work, the author defines dirt as "matter out of place". An important element of this definition is its contextual versatility. In other words, certain influences which may be perceived as impure in a certain setting might be accepted as ordinary and even appreciated in another context. As indicated later in our research, this is an interesting phenomenon since it explains certain attitudes towards commercialization.

For example, when clubs face financial difficulties, sponsorship agreements may be perceived as a lifeline, while in order context they might be perceived as having a polluting effect, of bringing dirt. Interestingly, the sacred facet is related to the extraordinary while its opposing element, the profane, is associated with the ordinary or in the context of Douglas' (1966) work – with the impure, the dirty. In the example of stadium *naming rights* this is an important consideration, especially since there is an increasing number of stadia sponsorships taking place. By interpreting Belk, Wallendorf and Sherry's (1989) views and transposing them into the specific phenomenon addressed in this paper, a parallel may be drawn – there is a risk of desacralization through becoming one of the many clubs which agree to a *naming rights* agreement. In other words, by sacrificing the distinctive and traditional name, clubs become a part of a rapidly growing group of teams without a recognizable identity.

The main threat for the club *heritage* is well-represented by Durkheim's conclusion that "the sacred … cannot, without losings its nature, be mixed with the profane" (1953, p.70). Thus, following Wallendorf and Sherry (1989) line of reasoning – by becoming one of the number of clubs which agree to *stadium branding*, the club is facing a risk of a more over-arching contamination – one which will not be limited to the stadium name alone. The loss of purity, in turn, is a major threat to the community's unity (Douglas, 1966). This is further supported by Belk, Wallendorf and Sherry's views (1989) that sports fanaticism calls for community identification and a general feeling of togetherness.

The perceived *authenticity* is another essential element which is a main pre-requisite for the preservation of the communal feeling (Dionisio, Leal & Moutinho, 2008). As Peterson (2005, p.1083) famously argued "issues of *authenticity* most often come into play when *authenticity* has been put in doubt". This is an important consideration in the context of this paper, since a potential renaming of the home stadium may be interpreted as opening Pandora's box – one action which may trigger a broader and stronger pushback from the fandom. If the branding is simply the tipping point, it will also raise multiple additional questions and concerns regarding the *authentic* preservation of the club at a whole. The communal reaction is essential in regard to safeguarding *authenticity* since it is socially constructed, instead of being a part of a specific element (Peterson, 2005). Moreover, Brown (2001) has identified the opposition between the *authenticity* and inauthenticity as one of the main challenges for modern day marketers. The negotiation process between corporations, or sports clubs in this example, and their customers is of fundamental importance since it will, ultimately, provide a distinct representation of what

constitutes an *authentic* experience (Grayson & Martinec, 2004). Therefore, this research paper seeks to provide a valuable practical contribution to all marketers which are involved in *corporate sponsorship* discussions. Understanding where the fandom draws the line is an essential starting point when projecting the potential dimensions of sponsorship negotiations. Grayson and Martinec (2004) argue that it is important for corporations to be aware of these dynamics, because the consumers will, most likely, react negatively to a potential manipulation of the perceived *authenticity*.

In order to highlight suitable preventive mechanism which would assist with avoiding such tension, Peterson (2005), in his work, has identified a number of potential ways of preserving the genuine appearance. For example, the author illustrates the possibility of preserving an *authentic* image through either ethnic or cultural identity or, alternatively, through status identity affirmation. Since the professional club is an impersonal entity, but at the same time is a focal point for the constitution of a community, the findings related to the cultural identity, or the formation of a certain value system are clearly relevant to the scope of our research. This is particularly valid for teams which have established associations with traditional *heritage* – as in the case with the former military clubs. Relating this specific example to Petersons' (2005) work illustrates that if the club seeks to retain its *authentic* appearance, the corporate communications and the identity of the club need to be aligned with the team's *heritage*.

In conclusion, it is evident that safeguarding *authenticity* is not a straightforward task and the responsibility does not lie within individuals or corporations alone. As Peterson (2005) concludes, in an era of global homogenization, the specific socio-cultural traits of geographical locations are becoming more and more obscured. Therefore, it may be argued that research dedicated to studying the effects of the element of *topophilia* will add a relevant addition to the research domain.

3.3   *Topophilia: Preserving the Authentic Home*

As previously argued, the concept of topophilia is under-developed and often ignored in the ongoing discussion regarding the increasing element of commercialization in professional sports and football in particular. Due to the magnitude of its symbolic importance, we seek to provide a more profound understanding of the fandoms' attitude towards the home stadium.

Home is a timeless and omnipresent concept which is of great importance for mankind, regardless of ones' nationality, religion or political beliefs. It is a symbol of unconditional comfort and a safe haven in turbulent times. As such, it is a sacred place where individuals engage in consumption within a social and predominantly familiar context (Sassatelli, 2007). As pointed out by Roberta Sassatelli, there is a certain contradiction between consumption and the preservation of the authentic nature of the home. It is an environment in which, contrary to the general understanding, commercialization does not erode the traditional and vastly positive connotations linked to the concepts of home.

In the context of football fans and their emotional attachment to the home stadium, one essential part of Giulianotti's article (2002) is dedicated to *topophilia*, which may be best defined as "a strong sense of place, which often becomes mixed with the sense of cultural identity among certain people and a love of certain aspects of such a place" (Collins, n.d.a). In his article, Giulianotti (2002) draws on Bale (1993) in order to reinforce the assumption that football fans do feel a strong bond to the clubs' home ground. Cuba and Hummon (1993) expand this by adding that not only the physical place alone, in this case a stadium, establishes a home for people, factors like the community also create the feeling of being at home. Furthermore, people identify home as the place where social and habitual interaction takes place and this must not be limited to one single space (Terkenli, 1995).

Another influential paper is Boyd's *"Selling Home: corporate Stadium names and the destruction of commemoration"* (2000). The author defines stadia as places of commemoration – being true symbols of the local history. Boyd is openly critical of the emerging *stadium naming* trend and although he focuses on the USA and on sports different than football, it is evident that there is a degree of similarity behind the phenomenon in North America and in Europe. What is very clear in Boyd's (2000) work is his negative attitude towards the renaming of stadia, as he argues that the commercialization contributes to the estrangement from the local community. He also tries to pose a question on where do sport clubs draw the line, however the threshold of what would be considered acceptable by the supporters is still unclear. This uncertainty may be explained by Giulianotti's model (2002) – the different spectator categories react differently to commercially-driven activities which involve their team.

Whether *authenticity* is preserved is hard to assess, as the academic community is yet to find a unifying definition of the term. Davis (2015) does not agree with the constraints behind the firm and binding definitions of the term. For example, the author believes that Giulianotti's

postmodernist convictions are not representative, due to the fact that they do not reflect the option for a supporter to opt-out of the commercialized model and decide to follow an *"authentic"* club.

Spectators on their part are also considered to be very sensitive to foreign practices which are being transposed into their traditional activities taking place at the home ground. Redhead (1997) claimed that soccer culture has become privatized and marketized and also referred to it as being Americanized. To illustrate that, there was a short and unsuccessful attempt at introducing cheerleaders at a few English stadia in the 1990's. As in the works of Ritzer (1996), this clear attempt at hyper-commodification of the match day experience was, however, a step too far for most fans and the practice was discontinued shortly after.

According to Brick, *authentic topophilia* can be seen as a "form of resistance to the new consumption of fandom" (2000, p.160). In his view, the traditional football fan used to belong to the working class and the commoditization shift has sparked tensions between the "real" fans and the newcomers. Brick (2000), similar to Giulianotti (2002), argues that clubs have become more interested in attracting more fair-weather fans, as they are the ones that would typically associated with higher earnings and, in turn, higher disposable income. The natural reaction of the traditional fan is to oppose this trend, as it could ultimately price-out some of the core supporters due to the introduction of significantly higher ticket prices. Ultimately, traditional fans reassert their notion of being *authentic* through specific symbols such as historical songs and nostalgia for the open-terrace setting of their home grounds (Brick, 2000).

Furthermore, Davis (2015) sees the *authentic* vs. inauthentic dichotomy as being an obstacle for a more meaningful discussion. The author draws on Brown (1998) in order to highlight the threat that corporate investments pose for the "fan democracy". In his article *"Fanatics! Power, identity & fandom in football"*, Brown (1998) suspects English teams in being part of a well-camouflaged plan to gradually introduce and fortify consumerist values among the supporter communities. It was namely Brown (1998) who firstly suggested opting-out and supporting newly-founded, corporation-free teams as a clear of active consumer resistance. Whether this is an effective way of resistance is still subject to debate, as there would be no apparent historical links between a newly established club and the original one. According to Close and Zinkhan (2007), that would be an example of market resistance in which the consumer rejects all culturally established values and ritualized marketplace behaviours.

For example, we may look at a hypothetical scenario in which a group of supporters decides to resist the corporate transformation of their home team by founding a new club (or simply put, a new legal entity). Would that be interpreted as an attempt of safeguarding *authenticity*? Or perhaps one can argue that there is no *heritage* and no historical values to protect, as there would be no formal affiliations with the original club. These questions are open for interpretation; however, few would disagree with the statement that namely the home stadium is a clear and undeniable symbol of *authenticity* (Boyd, 2000). Although this could have been a valid argument in the past, nowadays this may not be perceived as a reliable criterion, as many clubs agree to relocate to new venues, as a result of deals struck with sponsoring corporations. Some of the most recognizable football clubs, such as Arsenal FC, Manchester City FC, FC Bayern Munich, have agreed to relocate to newer and more modern stadia as a result of *naming rights agreements*. Thus, if the original stadium is an indicator of the *authenticity*, this would imply that these flagship clubs have now renounced their *heritage* in order to provide more comfort for their post-fandom supporters. And although the more radically minded would tend to favour this line of thought, a relevant question which our research would like to pose is – are clubs able to *sell or lease a stadia name without triggering resistance because of an authenticity sacrifice*?

In sum, this paper studies the social dynamics behind consumer behaviour, with a specific emphasis on football fandom. The research draws on the reviewed literature to allow for a broader view on resistance, *authenticity* and commercialization in consumer societies. Giulianotti's model (2002) presents profound insights about the different types of football spectators, which are developed by the element of opposition. Resistance is demonstrated in form of instances where people are unwilling to change or do not know how to change (Prochaska & Prochaska, 1999). Moreover, the research of Woisetschläger, Haselhoff and Backhaus (2014) indicates an increase in fan resistance triggered by sponsors' attitudes towards commercialization. As fan communities play an essential part in the success of a team or the whole club, it may be argued that over-commercialization could lead to a threat for all involved parties (Woisetschläger, Haselhoff & Backhaus, 2014). In sum, by analysing and understanding the potential fan reactions to *stadium branding*, we seek to contribute to the existing academic dialogue around commercialization by adding an additional perspective through the focus on *topophilia*, which we argue is an important dimension which has not been extensively researched prior to this research. In other words, the purpose of the article is to expand the existing knowledge regarding the relevant element of *topophilia* since it is an integral element

in regard to maintaining club *authenticity*. By exploring the fandom attitudes towards the stadium name, our research provides new perspectives on fan communities and facilitates future practical actions while advancing the theoretical discussion.

4. *Methodology*

In addition to the literature review and the theoretical perspectives, alongside the characteristics of the study and our research questions introduced in the previous chapter, a description of the methodology is merited. Therefore, this chapter illustrates and advocates for the choice of the research philosophy, followed by an argumentation for the rationale of the selected research approach and strategy. Furthermore, a discussion of the data collection procedure, its time horizon and the analysis of the empirical data is described. The motivation and the links between the choices and the study's objectives are outlined throughout each section. They illustrate how certain aspects, such as trustworthiness and *authenticity*, need to be acknowledged. Lastly, the section is concluded by an outline of the delineatiation of the ethical issues and limitations related to the selected method.

4.1 Research Philosophy

Much has been written about the significance of introducing a reflection on the philosophical assumptions and how these factors strongly influence the construction of a solid and valid research (Bryman & Bell, 2015; Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015). Both Johnson and Clark (2006) and Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill (2009) considered this practice a crucial step when discussing our position, not only to increment the quality and the creativity, but also to provide guidance when selecting the most appropriate research strategy to answer the research questions (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015). For this reason, similar to the metaphor of the trunk of a tree used by Easterby-Smith, Thorpe and Jackson (2015), these assumptions are perceived as the human body – the heart playing the role of the ontology, surrounded by the other vital organs, which are the epistemology and methodology, whereas the skin represents the choice of method and technique.

This research seeks to investigate the importance of home ground among the different spectators' taxonomies, in the context of the increasing commercialization in football, exploring the existing knowledge regarding the *topophilic* factor. Therefore, in relation to the purpose of our work, the type of ontology – the philosophy "about the nature of reality and existence" (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015, p. 46) – is determined as a relativist approach, due to the fact the research demands a high degree of personal engagement to gather new insights

(Bryman & Bell, 2015). The selected relativist stance highlights not only our views regarding the absence of a single truth or reality, but also to showcase that different views and contrasting accommodation may be held, by distinct individuals, as the interests and experiences in relation to a specific topic might differ (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015).

Drawing on the selected ontology, the paper explores why social actors, in this case different spectator taxonomies, adopt analogous or contrasting perspectives. Thus, investigating how the different understanding and perception of the topic varies in regard to the discussion between the main protagonists is of scholarly interest (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015). In addition, as it will be described in the next paragraphs, it is fundamental to indicate that the knowledge captured in this research is built around two separate contexts which are characterized by different cultural dimensions. As illustrated throughout the findings section of the paper, the two cases represent varied traditional, historical and long-established social values which, in turn, shape the two streams of empirical material.

Furthermore, the chosen ontology is of great importance when adopting a specific epistemology since it needs to be aligned with the "general set of assumptions about ways of inquiring into the nature of the world" (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015, p. 47). For this reason, when investigating whether people resist or cope with a specific change like *stadium branding*, the research rests on social constructionism as a philosophical ground. Evaluating different social behaviours, and therefore different outcomes in order to draw meaningful conclusions, explain for the reality constructed within the everyday life (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015). In simpler terms – human beliefs, feelings and their values system are the main motives of the study. The research scope does not seek to unveil objective and external causes which explain specific behaviours. Instead, it aims to understand the subjective ways through which people attach their own meaning to the specific topic of *topophilia*, especially through sharing their thoughts, interests and experiences (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2009).

In the interest of objectivity, when adopting the aforementioned ontological and epistemological stances, some weaknesses need to be considered. One such example is the influence of our viewpoints and backgrounds when analysing and interpreting the data, as well as the complexity of capturing the cultural differences (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015). As the research is drawing on the interpretation of multiple authors, which also perceive reality as socially constructed, a combination of relativism and social constructionism may be perceived as the most pertinent philosophical standpoint in regard to the scope of this research

(Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009; Bryman & Bell, 2015). Therefore, as we seek to evaluate the potential resistance towards *stadium naming* practices, observations, live interactions and discussions will be the most appropriate methods of gathering rich and relevant empirical material.

4.2   Research Approach

This section addresses the possible research approaches and illustrates the reasons as to why the specific position was selected. According to Alvesson and Sköldberg (2009) there are three views regarding the relationship between theory and research – inductive, deductive and abductive. Considering the topic of our research and the discussion in the preceding section, which illustrates the philosophies which influence the research approach, an inductive approach is the fitting option.

Through an inductive approach, "theory is the outcome of research" via a process where generalizable inferences arise through a set of observations (Bryman & Bell, 2015, p. 25). In other words, theory is not used as a starting point with the objective of testing or expanding its validity, but rather as the result of analysis and interpretation of valuable empirical observation and findings. Stemming from the exploratory nature of the research design, which seeks to investigate how spectators perceive *stadium naming rights agreements*, observations are defined as the starting point of the data collection process. Firstly, a methodical analysis of the observations and the findings is implemented in order to highlight common themes. Secondly, once the empirical data is analysed, the paper contributes to the existing knowledge by developing the under-developed, but highly relevant factor of *topophilia*. The inductive approach removes some of the main limitations of deductive and abductive approaches. More specifically, deducting hypothesis which must be subjected to an empirical inquiry or using theory as point of departure (Bryman & Bell, 2015). In fact, by relying on the observations and findings, the research generates rich empirical material, advanced knowledge and insights of the phenomenon of interest. To conclude, the selected data collection method is related the broader description of the research strategy – elaborating on why a qualitative method is the most appropriate way of investigating the *topophilic* phenomenon.

4.3   Research Strategy & Method

As defined by Bryman and Bell (2015), the research strategy illustrates the general orientation employed when conducting business research. With regard to the study's purpose of outlining the effect which branding stadiums might have on different kinds of spectators and, specifically how the often-neglected concept of *topophilia* might influence their viewpoints, our research is characterized by its exploratory nature. The objective is not to provide an absolute and conclusive answer, instead the research seeks to contribute through generation of relevant insights in the discussion which addresses the increasing commercialization in the football world (Singh, 2007). In addition, as our research questions seek answers to the questions of how spectators perceive *naming rights agreements* and *which are the specific resistance triggers*, the use of qualitative methods is the most appropriate and pertinent choice (Bryman & Bell, 2015; Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015).

When constructing a study about different types of spectator reactions towards *stadium naming* practices, previous researchers have utilized both quantitative and qualitative methods. However, the choice between the two is highly connected and dependent on the specific problematization and objective (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009). Qualitative studies collect information in a non-numeric, interpretive and interactive form with the aim of clarifying perceptions, views, symbols, settings and interpretations of humans used in individual or group interactions – regardless of verbal or written communications (Easterby- Smith, Thorpe, & Jackson, 2015). Their goal is to "understand and explain beliefs and behaviours within the context they occur" (Draper, 2004, p.642). Therefore, in view of the selected philosophy and approach, the study follows an interpretative direction (Bryman & Bell, 2015; Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015). Exploring the underlying meanings of how people make sense of their lives and, more specifically, how commercial forces influence the perceived *authenticity* is of particularly strong interest within the scope of the research (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). For this reason, qualitative research methods are utilized – they allow for a discovery of different opinions, perceptions of spectators through the precise language utilized, leveraging more on their advocacy and choice of words rather than numbers (Bryman & Bell, 2015). Additionally, using qualitative methods allows us to investigate *the concept of home* more profoundly since the empirical material will be collected in its specific and natural environment (Bryman & Bell, 2015).

In addition, alongside the aforementioned philosophy, in order to further advocate for the selected research strategy, the research opts for multi-qualitative methods (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2009). The main reason for this is to ensure the sound credibility of the contribution using triangulation of qualitative methods (Bryman & Bell, 2015; Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2009). Therefore, by using diverse methods, the methodology is able to fully offset its limitations and increase the study's confirmability (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2009).

In conclusion, with regards to our research time horizon, the study has been completed in a time span of ten weeks. The principles of ethnography will be employed, at least partially, due to the immersion for three days in both countries. We were able to do so by participating and attending the football game rituals among the fandom (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015). *(please refer to Appendix 1)*

4.4 Data Collection Method

As a result of the chosen ontological and epistemological stances, and considering the study's purpose of investigating the importance of home stadiums among the different spectators, qualitative methods have been identified as the most suitable means of answering the two research questions. Adopting these methods is fully in-line with the exploratory and interpretative nature of the research, since studying the phenomenon in a flexible way through more contextual data and insights is deemed preferable (Bryman & Bell, 2015). In order to collect relevant and rich empirical data, two distinct methods have been utilized – focus groups and semi-structured interviews (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015). They, in turn, allow for relatively unstructured and open-ended questions rather than pre-coded and systematic ones (Bryman & Bell, 2015). This is of great importance, as the objective of the focus group is to allow an environment in which participants may freely express not only their beliefs and experiences, but also their emotions and passions (Bryman & Bell, 2015).

Conducting focus groups and semi-structured interviews adds value mainly through a flexible nature which allows for inductive exploration (Bryman & Bell, 2015). In view of the emphasis on spectator beliefs, face-to-face interaction is perceived as a crucial ingredient for the study's success (Lofland & Lofland, 1995). Acquiring a deeper understanding of the participants' perceptions of *stadium naming* practices, allows for the identification of the potential difference in terms of reactions. In order to answer the question related to *how spectators perceive naming*

rights agreements and *which are the specific resistance triggers*, two distinct cases have been selected and analysed. The first one, CSKA Sofia, is a hypothetical example since the stadium name is still traditional and has not been a subject to corporate branding. The second example, Malmö FF, is reflective since the stadium name is already named after a corporation. The research does not seek to compare the two cases, but instead it aims to highlight different cultural dimensions which might affect the way different spectators support their favourite teams. For this reason, the advantage from having two cases in parallel reduces the exposure towards a singular direction and, in addition, provides a broader picture regarding the strength of the cultural bias among the fandom (Bryman & Bell, 2015; Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015).

The focus groups for both cases, representing the primary data collection method, were conducted in purposefully selected locations – namely at the respective teams' stadiums. Since the location is also the fundamental object of the research and the discussion, holding it at the stadium increased the likelihood of obtaining rich and diverse insights (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009). In addition, to further improve that possibility, the research team provided an open and benign atmosphere, which stimulated a transparent and engaging discussion (Chaffin, 2016).

The semi-structured interviews, representing the secondary collection method, were aimed at gathering the participants in what is supposed to be the fandom home. However, due to the time constraints and the conflicting schedules of the interviewees, the interviews were conducted in different sites. Despite the minor inconsistencies in the location between the two methods, we do not perceive this is a negative development since we did not seek to validate the general findings from the focus groups, but rather to use the interviews as a secondary step of collecting empirical data (Morgan, 1998).

Since Bulgarian is the native language of the participants of CSKA Sofia's case, both the focus group and the interviews were held in Bulgarian. The origin of one of the two researchers made this possible. The decision to hold the discussions in Bulgarian rather than in English intended to facilitate the interviewees in their attempt to express their opinions in a more detailed fashion (Bryman & Bell, 2015). For the second context, namely Malmö FF's case, the focus group and the interviews were conducted in English since the participants presented a sufficient fluency in the language.

To conclude, the method consistency was maintained through controlling the moderator involvement level. By doing so, interventions took place only when the discussion was in need of steering. This gave the participants the freedom to express their thoughts in a more natural and extensive manner (Bryman & Bell, 2015). Therefore, focus group and semi-structured interviews allowed for a clearly distinction between the different subjective beliefs and behaviours of the participants around the topic of stadium *naming rights* and, more concretely, around the concept of *topophilia*.

The following tables highlights the general structure of the data collection strategy, including the specific location, date and average duration of each entry. Moreover, the details of our data collection process will be presented in the following sections.

Location	Dates	Collection Method	Duration
Stadium "Bulgarska Armiya", Sofia, Bulgaria	02/04/2017	Focus Group	82 Minutes
"Swedbank Stadion", Malmö, Sweden	04/05/2017	Focus Group	93 Minutes

Table 1: Focus Groups general information.

Location	Dates	Collection Method	Duration
"LUX-Biblioteket", Lund, Sweden	21/04/2017	Semi-structured Interview	38 Minutes
Remote, Lund / Sofia, Sweden	25/04/2017	Semi-structured Interview	33 Minutes
Remote, Lund / Växjö, Sweden	25/04/2017	Semi-structured Interview	25 Minutes

Table 2: Semi-Structured Interviews general information.

4.4.1 Sampling Approach

The research aims to expand the existing knowledge regarding the importance of *stadium branding* practices among the different spectators' taxonomies, adding the concept of *topophilia* in the increasing discussion of commercialization in football. However, to achieve this goal, and to answer our research questions a suitable sampling approach needed to be

selected (Bryman & Bell, 2015). To ensure the collection of a wide range of perspectives through opinions and behaviours from different spectators' categories, we decided to use non-probability quota sampling (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2009). In other words, the focus group members and interviewees were not selected randomly, but purposefully chosen according to specific criteria and characteristics (Bryman & Bell, 2015).

According to Burns and Burns, non-probability quota sampling is characterized by a "sample composed of freely selected but predefined number or proposition of units of each category of predetermined characteristics" (2008, p. 218). Therefore, the participants were selected within proportioned quotas, accounting predesigned peculiarities (Burns & Burns, 2008). As outlined in within the preceding chapters, we have adopted the Giulianotti's model (2002) as an analytical tool to define the characteristics between the different spectator taxonomies – *"Supporters", "Fans", "Followers" and "Flâneurs"*. The common factor among the panel was their participation in the community. The participants encapsulated the diverse and contrasting spectators' observation and stances, from the most traditional and hot to the cooler and commercial relations. In turn, the variety of attending personas decreases the unwanted potential social pressure (Bryman & Bell, 2015).

Furthermore, as outlined in the previous section, we selected two different contexts based on their different approach towards the stadium *naming rights*, one more retrospective – Malmö FF, and one more prospective – CSKA Sofia. There is no intention of a comparative study between the two different contexts, instead we seek to gain an advantage from having two cases in parallel through mitigation of the risk of having one direction and due to the fact strong cultural bias. We believe that these two contexts present an optimal way of identifying potential extreme cultural influences regarding any *stadia naming decisions*. Also, the variety in the sample allowed us to detect different perspectives as well as the way of reasoning in each interaction.

The first context, Malmö FF, founded in 1910, is among the most successful professional football clubs in Sweden. Based in Malmö, the team has won 19 championships titles, 14 domestic cups and participated in the European Cups with the Champions Cup final in 1979. In addition, Malmö FF is considered much more than just a successful football team. The 12th player, namely the supporters, are acclaimed for their passion and for the atmosphere they are able create during the games. The team resided at Malmö Stadion from 1958 to 1990, followed by a four-year interim stay at Malmö IP, before finally moving to the newly built Swedbank

Stadion in 2009. This fundamental decision triggered discussions within the fandom for two main reasons. First, the stadium was not build on the same ground as Malmö Stadion, which is still located just a few hundred meters from the new facility. Second, the team announced on 12th of July 2007 the sale of the *naming rights* to Swedbank, which has also invested in the construction of the new arena.

The second context, CSKA Sofia was founded in 1948, and is the official inheritor of former officer club AS-1923. The team has the record 31 titles, 4 national Super Cups, 20 domestic cups and it is the only Bulgarian team which reached the semi-final of the European Champion Clubs Cup twice. Additionally, throughout its entire history, the team's home ground has always been the "Bulgarska Armiya" Stadium, situated in the city centre of Sofia. Prior to the official formation of CSKA, which is a club with a strong military background, the stadium was used by AS-1923. In early 2009, the new owners of the club announced their intentions of building a new stadium which was intended to replace the current one. Later, on October 13, 2009, it was announced that the construction of a stadium would have begun on February 1, 2010 and would start with the demolition of "Bulgarska Armiya". Despite their intentions, the construction never initiated due to disagreement between the club owners and the Ministry of Sport. Therefore, unlike the Malmö FF case, the discussion among CSKA Sofia's spectators is more intense due to the hypothetical nature.

When advocating for the selected examples, we believe that these contexts draw the necessary attention towards the importance of our topic. As we are interested in investigating how the *concept of home* might affect the different spectators' perspectives, subjective beliefs and behaviour related to *stadium naming agreements*, we consider CSKA Sofia and Malmö FF to represent two valuable examples which present relevant and intriguing findings.

Within the ten-week span of our research we managed to visit both Sofia and Malmö in order to conduct the data collection in order to gain the necessary amount of empirical material which empowered us to answer our main research questions. As already mentioned, we spent four full days in both cities, not only to conduct the focus groups and the interviews but also to temporarily immerse ourselves in the fan communities. For example, we watched two full games standing on the supporters' side, which is considered to be the most passionate and somehow extreme area of the stadium. We also visited the team's museums which allows for a better understanding of the *heritage* of both clubs. In addition, prior to our face-to-face interaction, we were in constant contact with the participants in order to create a feeling of trust

and commitment (Alvesson, 2003). These aspects may be considered fundamental as collecting the needed amount of empirical data allowed us to fully understand the complexity of the topic and provide valuable insights into *how spectators have reacted or will react to stadium branding* practices when the often-neglected concept of *topophilia* is considered.

With regard to the sampling process, to select the participants, various approaches, like social media and personal networking were used. Using the Giulianotti model (2002) as an analytical tool enabled us to originate specific criteria and characteristics necessary to find the most appropriate participants. Once a list of possible candidates was drawn, we started contacting them by e-mail, informing them about the study while emphasizing on the intriguing location of the focus group – namely at the home stadiums. After a few introductory questions, serving as a basic validation process in order to understand whether the selection criteria have been fulfilled, details for the structure of the discussion were provided. This approach proved to be effective for several reasons, such as the increasing interest towards the topic by the different participants.

To conclude, the employed technique, which is fully aligned with the research questions and qualitative approach to the study, represents an appropriate and representative sample. As it will be further illustrated in the following chapters, the participants were asked for their consent about the publication of their personal details (Bryman & Bell, 2015; Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015).

4.4.2 Focus Groups

Throughout the preceding section, we have argued for the defined profiles which are a fundamental prerequisite of a successful data collection step. Giulianotti's model (2002) was applied to the two previously introduced contexts as an analytical and diagnostic tool to define and structure the sample of participants engaged in the study. Our multi-qualitative method employed focus groups as one out of two, equally important, means of collecting empirical material (Bryman & Bell, 2015; Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015). Furthermore, our decision was supported by the adopted research strategy, as we sought to introduce the additional dimension of *topophilic* sentiments to the existing academic dialogue. Our main objective is to uncover different perspectives, subjective beliefs and behaviours, perceived by the spectators (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000).

Much has been written over the years regarding the strength of focus groups, especially within the social science and CCT studies in particular (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2009). According to Easterby-Smith, Thorpe and Jackson (2015) and to Bryman and Bell (2015) this method is considered as one of the most useful qualitative tools to improve the understanding of how certain individuals react, as member of a group, to a specific phenomenon. In addition, it enables to "examine the way in which people in conjunction with one another construe the general topic in which the researcher is interested" (Bryman & Bell, 2015, p. 514). Therefore, the derived behaviours and interactions represent a valuable addition to our study. They generated a satisfactory amount of multi-oriented thoughts not only regarding the ongoing discussion between the different spectators among *stadium branding* practices, but also around the assumption that *topophilia* might have influenced their ideas.

To gather the necessary data, the two focus group discussions, lasting approximately 90 minutes, were characterized by a certain degree of flexibility (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015). This was fully in line with the exploratory nature of the study. Each of the discussions were comprised of four different participants, typical representatives for each category of the Giulianotti's model (2002). Additionally, as illustrated in the previous chapter, both focus groups were held in the same environmental setting - the local football stadium, in order to provide a thematic, friendly and consistent atmosphere (Herzog, 2005) (Table 3-4). Due to their familiarity to the venue, the setting represented a neutral space were all the different participants had the opportunity to freely express their thoughts without any distractions (Alvesson, 2003). Therefore, it may be argued that the high emotional involvement of the attending participants contributed to the rich nature of the empirical material (Morgan, 1998).

Name	Role	Participant Profile
Nikolay Georgiev	**Supporter**	**Nikolay is a representative of the organized fan structure of Sektor G. As a "Supporter" his relationship with the club can be classified as thick –comprised of a combination of hot relationship with the club, coupled with a strongly represented traditionalist mindset.**
Ivan Manov	**Follower**	**Ivan is one of the founders of the non-profit organization CSKA Shareholders. As a "Follower" he has a cooler relationship with the club, however he is also an ambassador of the tradition values and is particularly committed to preserving the heritage and the community.**
Nikola Darpatov	**Fan**	**Nikolay is one of the most influential CSKA Sofia fans online. As a "Fan" he demonstrates a hot relationship with the club, although unlike the "Supporter", his affiliation is manifested by strong performance-orientation. He has a strong interest in the clubs history and insists on pursuing short-term success as a mean of safeguarding the clubs European-wide reputation.**
Alexander Haralampiev	**Flâneur**	**Alexander is a modern CSKA fan who is very aware of the general development of international football. As a "Flâneur", he has a relatively cool relationship to the club, however, certain occurrences can trigger a hotter response and an increased element of commitment over a specific period.**

Table 3: Detailed description of the Focus Group 1 (Sofia – Bulgaria)

Name	Role	Participant Profile
Emil Persson	**Supporter**	**Emil is a representative of the organized Malmö FF supporter structure. As a "Supporter" his relationship with the club can be classified as "Hot" with a strongly expressed traditionalist mindset.**
Ola Olsson	**Follower**	**Ola has been following Malmö FF for over 30 years. His first visit was when he was 11 years old and now, he still has a seasonal ticket. As a "Follower" he has a cooler, more distant relationship with the club, however he is particularly committed to preserving the cultural heritage and the specific traits of the local community.**
Max Wiman	**Fan**	**Max is an influential journalist, who is responsible for Malmö FF's press coverage in the local journal Sydsvenskan. He gravitates in close proximity to the club and has a strong and passionate relationship to the club and the historical achievements recorded in the last four decades. As a "Fan" he is very performance-oriented and prioritizes short-term success.**
Jacob Lindblad	**Flâneur**	**Jacob is a new-generation Malmö FF fan who is very aware of the general development of international football at a whole. As a "Flâneur", he has a relatively cool relationship to the club, especially since he has an interest in other teams which are not part of the local league.**

Table 4: Detailed description of the Focus Group 2 (Malmö – Sweden)

With regards to the discussion process, we played the role of facilitators throughout the dialogue (Easterby- Smith, Thorpe, & Jackson, 2015). As outlined by Blackburn and Stokes (2000) despite the main characteristics of focus groups of being loosely structured, but never entirely without structure, we formed a topic guide (Easterby- Smith, Thorpe, & Jackson, 2015). It included a general outline with important aspects and issues which needed to be converted during the discussion *(please refer to Appendix 2)*. Therefore, we decided to start the discussion by asking the participants to briefly introduce themselves, in order to decrease the social pressure and to create an informal climate with a good atmosphere that promotes positive and constructive interactions (Bryman & Bell, 2015). Once the presentation was completed, relevant contextual information was provided to the participants who were asked to openly comment and express their opinions and perceptions motivating their arguments rather than giving closed and non-exhaustive answers. Specifically, the panel group was asked to relate the context of the discussion with their personal emotional attachments and feelings, also when referring to past experiences. In addition, we did not attempt to conduct several interviews simultaneously, but rather facilitate the discussion among the participants leading to a wide-ranging exploration (Walker, 1985). In turn, this lead the contributions to be generated equally and it increased the participants' willingness to express their own feelings, as well as offering a more realistic picture of what they feel and think (Fontana & Frey, 1994 cited in Alvesson, 2003). Overall, facilitation was only needed in order to keep the discussion on track and moving at a reasonable pace. We emphasized that the analysis is a group project and that no one will be criticized or judged for raising questions or voicing concerns. Thus, this non-intrusive and impartial stance encouraged the focus group members to share diverse and multi-oriented thoughts (Bryman & Bell, 2015).

With regards to the discussion in Sofia, since Bulgarian is the native language of one of us, the focus group was held in Bulgarian. Due to the participants' intermediate level of English, this benefited the way in which the focus group members were able to express their thoughts and feelings (Bryman & Bell, 2015). During the discussion, we also focused on observing the non-verbal communication which was taking place (Bryman & Bell, 2015). Intriguingly, during the last third of the focus group, all the participants spontaneously decided to switch to English in order to also involve the second moderator, as he was not able to understand the local language. Unlike this collection step, the discussion with the Malmö FF spectators was conducted in English since the participants presented a sufficient fluency in the language. As our research was interested in understanding the meaning of certain phenomena is jointly constructed, both

focus groups offered us the opportunity to investigate the perspectives spectators collectively construe around *stadium branding* practices, specifically when the concept of *topophilia* is added into the discussion.

When considering focus groups, like all other forms of data collection methods involving group interviews, some shortcomings need to be outlined. Firstly, social pressure or the fear of being judged may influence the provided responses, resulting in a general unwillingness to share genuine views publicly. Secondly, being surrounded by unfamiliar individuals might increase the possibility of a certain eagerness to impress the other members at any cost, even at the expense of truthfulness (Morgan, 1998). The fact that participants were not familiar to many people in the group, created the opportunity for new and different perspectives to be observed. In an exploratory study such as ours, focus groups enabled the participants to think about aspects which might have otherwise remained unvoiced. Hearing the participants' views allowed us to grasp a peripheral vision of the phenomena, collecting several useful insights not only related to our specific field of study (Bryman & Bell, 2015). In sum, the advantages of developing an in-depth understanding about why people feel in a certain manner, or the opportunity to allow them to probe each other's reasons for holding a certain view, outweigh the shortcomings described above.

Finally, participants were duly notified that the discussion was audio recorded, and they provided consent for the use of their personal details. The focus groups provided intriguing insights and are widely addressed in the following chapter of this paper. It is our firm belief that, since the different participant viewpoints are considered as the backbone of this study, the focus groups allowed for us to capture relevant insights regarding the concept of *topophilia* within *stadium naming* practices.

4.4.3 Semi-Structured Interviews

As indicated throughout each section of the study, our purpose is to explore the perceptions of *stadium branding* practices among the different spectators' and, more specifically, how the often-neglected concept of *topophilia* might affects their behaviours. To achieve this goal, we decided to utilize qualitative interviews as a second method of collecting valuable and meaningful data *(please refer to Appendix 2)*. This method is an adequate fit to our research approach due to its flexibility and its ability to reflect the understanding that a topic may vary in regard to the different social setting (Bryman & Bell, 2015; Easterby-Smith, Thorpe &

Jackson, 2015). The interviews enhanced the credibility of our contribution through a triangulation of the utilized methods (Bryman & Bell, 2015; Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2009). Moreover, they allowed for further scrutinization of the spectators' responses (Bryman & Bell, 2015).

According to Tracy, qualitative interviews "provide opportunities for mutual discovery, understanding, explanation, and interpretation … and elucidate subjectively lived experience and viewpoints" (2013, p. 134). Therefore, they allow for further insights to be observed through the interpretation of the specific phenomena in relation not only to the actual individual viewpoints, but also to the underlying reasons which illustrate why they hold these particular stances (King, 2004, cited in Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015; Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). As our focus was to explore the fandom attitudes, it may be argued that qualitative interviewing is a suitable method of data collection for this study. In terms of the interview structure, we utilized semi-structured interviews in an attempt to stimulate the conversation rather than actively seeking to navigate the participants towards specific responses (Bryman & Bell, 2015). The method provides an adequate degree of flexibility and allowed to obtain relevant insights of the participants' perceptions toward the concept of *topophilia*, especially when considering *stadium naming practices*.

On a more general note, we aimed to gather data from 4 qualitative interviews since this format allows for the participants to describe their perceptions towards the topic of *stadium naming* without any other external influence or pressure (Bryman & Bell, 2015). By using a secondary method of data collection, we also seek to mitigate the described shortcomings of the focus group method. Two semi-structured interviews were supposed to be conducted for each context. In line with the sampling approach for the focus group, we decided to retain the non-probability quota sampling. In both settings, we were interested in investigating the two extremes sides of Giulianotti's model (2002), as we believed they encapsulate the completely opposing views on the topic. Therefore, we opted for a "Fan" and a "Supporter". The first one was chosen as the representative of the more consumerist relationship to the club, whereas the latter one, as the façade of the entire fandom communities respectively. In addition, as outlined in the previous paragraph, the interviewees were not included in the actual focus groups in an effort to omit bias from the open discussions' direction. The interview stage is not intended as a validation process as it does not reject or confirm the observations gathered in the preceding stage. Also, as more extreme personalities tend to influence their peers, having an individual discussion

instead allows for the research to evade a strong influence on the remaining participants (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015).

Similarly to the focus group approach, Bulgarian was used as the language for the CSKA Sofia interviews, while English was the main language for the interactions in Sweden. Due to the limited available time for the data collection in Bulgaria, a last-minute cancellation obstructed us from conducting the interview which was scheduled to take place in person. Thus, in total we managed to collect data from 3 individual interviewees – 1 in Bulgaria and 2 in Sweden. Although the slight inconsistency in the number of interviews is not optimal, we do not perceive this as a major issue since we do not seek to compare the two different contexts. Instead, we simply wanted to ensure that we have enough relevant empirical material in both contexts. Fortunately, the interviews were characterized by a high level of engagement of the respondents. The participants shared not only their attachment and interest towards the club and the specific topic, but also provided further insights related to the important aspects of *topophilia* when included into the general discussion regarding *stadium naming practices*.

With regards to the interviews' location, due to limited time availability of the participants and the stadium event coordinator time schedule, we were not able to conduct face-to-face interviews at the local stadiums. In the Bulgarian context, we conducted a remote interview through Skype, whereas in the Swedish case, we conducted both a face-to-face and a remote interview (Table 5). Although we acknowledge the fact that one of the selected two methods, namely the semi-structured interviewing, was not held at the same location, the quality and richness of the empirical provides us with sufficient confidence in the final output.

Name	Role	Collection Method	Duration
Martin Olsson (alias)	Supporter	Face-to-Face Interview	38 Minutes
Lyubomir Antonov	Fan	Remote Interview	33 Minutes
Pontus Liljenberg	Fan	Remote Interview	25 Minutes

Table 5: Summary of the Semi-Structured Interviews

With regards to the discussion process followed, we carried out a discussion characterized by a balance between flexibility and structure (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015). To follow the ethically sound review process, as presented by Yin (1994), all respondents were asked to provide their consent for the use of their names in the study and were informed that the interview will be audio-recorded to enable us to implement an accurate transcription. As a next step, the selection criteria used were communicated to the participants in order to provide additional contextual information (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015). These introductory moments benefited the atmosphere of the discussion and drew the group's attention and interest and ensured an interest in active participation. Then the participants were asked to introduce themselves, while emphasizing on their experience and interaction with their respective the football clubs. During this process we, as facilitators, assessed whether the pre-defined categories are meeting the background of the participants. Once the familiarization process was concluded, the discussion was initiated. A free-flowing and open ended discussion empowered us to explore the consequences of *stadium naming practices*, both when addressing prospective branding and when discussing the process retrospectively. The discussions were moderated in a peaceful atmosphere and were kept on track in order to gather relevant empirical data. As advised by Alvesson and Sköldberg (2009), the benign environment was stimulated by highlighting the absence of specific correct answers. Therefore, it may be argued that the interview format allowed for participants to share and argue for their beliefs and perceptions in a free and natural manner.

Considering the semi-structured nature of the interviews, we participated in the discussion through a facilitator role. On one hand, we considered the theme guide we prepared in advance, while on the other hand, we adjusted it accordingly to the interviewees position and responses (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015). Our main focus was oriented towards minimizing any interruptions and paying attention both to verbal and non-verbal communication (Bryman & Bell, 2015; Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2009). While doing so, we aimed to keep our involvement level to a minimum. This approach further reinforces the favourable environment in which the discussions were taking place.

To conclude, the data collection process exceeded our expectations and both focus groups and semi-structure interviews provided us with numerous valuable insights which served as a basis for our data analysis stage. Through the selection of appropriate participants and the usage of diverse methods, the applied data collection methods enabled us to overcome the highlighted

shortcomings (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2009). Additionally, both techniques present a logical continuation of our inductive approach which, in turn, empower us to proceed to the data analysis stage of our research (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009; Bryman & Bell, 2015).

4.5 Data Analysis

In line with the adopted research philosophy and strategy, and considering our study's main purpose of investigating the perception of *naming rights* agreements, the choice for an appropriate analytical method is warranted. Therefore, in order to scrutinize the wide range of possible perspectives among the different spectators' categories, we decided to adopt a hermeneutic stance, mainly with the ambition of exploring the lifework of our participants (Montesperelli, 1998). This interpretation method is favourable due to its flexible nature, it also enables us to manoeuvre through the empirical data, in order to identify certain patterns. As a second step, the patterns are coded and developed into themes, which consisted of supporting sub-themes. While the sub-themes present findings closer to the empirical observations, the overarching themes illustrate the more abstract phenomena, which are then illustrated through the specific examples (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009; Thompson, Pollio, & Locander, 1994). Thus, by adhering to an inductive and hermeneutic approach, we are able to analyse the outcomes of the data collection process in a systematic way. Ultimately, this made it possible for us to unveil whether the *topophilic* concept is a relevant factor when studying the implications of *stadium naming agreements*.

When conducting our analysis, we were following the guidelines embedded into the hermeneutic circle theory (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009). As the interpretation of text was considered the point of departure, hermeneutics incorporate the premise that "the meaning of a part can only be understood if it is related to the whole" (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009, p. 92). However, the whole consisted of many different parts so that an overall understanding was only possible based on the understanding these parts. For this reason, when interpreting our empirical data, we started at one point, and then delved further by alternating between the part and the whole, in order to gather a progressively deeper understanding of the phenomena of academic interest (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009). As the knowledge captured in this research is built around two ever-changing contexts, characterized by different cultural dimensions, we were adhering to the hermeneutic interpretation described by Alvesson and Sköldberg (2009). As a

result, we believe that not only the linguistic expression and acts needed to be understood in the socio-historical context of the actors, but also that we, as researchers, had to use our intuition to interpret the underlying meanings of the different participant expressions (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009).

According to Bryman and Bell (2015) to ensure a comprehensive examination of the content, the conversation needs to be fully transcribed. This transcript is considered as a "polysemous" text as it differs from the original due to the fact it does not include only the words of the interviewees. It also embeds the narration of the event, the objects and facts from the interviewers' lifework alongside the non-verbal communication codes (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015). As in the first case of our empirical collection was held in Bulgarian, when words or sentences could not be directly translated, appropriate paraphrasing was justified. Further focus was put on each transcription and on the exact comments and sentences used by participants, respecting the original context in which they were expressed in order to understand their real meaning and avoid any false interpretation of the data collected (Bryman & Bell, 2015). This, in turn, led the transcription process to result in a large quantity of 60 pages of transcripts which were analysed over the allocated time period.

With regards to the systematic process, the focus groups and the semi-structured interviews' data were examined through a four steps model, including three main actions for the data interpretation – sorting, reducing and arguing (Rennstam, 2017). Firstly, we familiarized ourselves with the material, read carefully through the different transcript on multiple occasions, followed by selecting and commenting on the most relevant excerpts. Secondly, we conducted initial coding by labelling with different colours the recurrent perspectives. In this way, we tried to understand the uncovered meanings and generated numerous category codes, which ultimately formed the sub-themes. As a next step, we focused on formulating the overarching themes, based on the detected patterns. Lastly, we refined the categories in order to emphasize on the most abstract and relevant data, which would equip us with the means to answer our research questions. To answer our question of what are the specific *trigger points for resistance*, these steps were conducted in both contexts. In this way, we retained the exploratory and interpretative nature of the study, while delineating the most appropriate insights and outlining what are the specific causes for any fandom dissatisfaction.

To conclude, since we were two researchers working on this study, we independently identified and selected the data from the transcriptions in order to diversify the risk of potential bias and

to match the findings which we found to be most relevant (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015). As a next stage, we jointly discussed our individual reviews before selecting the findings which illustrated mutual agreement (Bryman & Bell, 2015). Therefore, through 'intersubjectivity', and by having both researchers jointly conducting the data collection and independently interpreting them prior to the formation of the specific themes, we aim at attaining a higher level of both completeness, accuracy and credibility.

4.6 Research Methodology Limitations

This section is mainly addressed to outline the general "sensitizing" concepts and criteria when conducting management and business research (Blumer, 1954). In addition, it highlights the limitations associated with our chosen methodology and, more specifically, with the employment of our specific qualitative methods. According to Mason (1996) and Easterby-Smith, Thorpe and Jackson (2015), there are contrasting views on the research quality measures - namely validity, reliability and generalisability. The root of the discussion stems from the dependency on philosophical viewpoints, individual problematization and objectives. However, by scrutinising a wide range of possible similar or contrasting perspectives among the different spectator categories, we were able to assess how and why these participants adopt specific stances. Therefore, on this basis are in agreement with Lincoln and Guba's (1985) interpretation of reliability and validity - accounting for the fact that in social research there is an absent of an absolute truth about the social world. For this reason, we suggest trustworthiness and authenticity as general measures of the quality for our qualitative study (Bryman & Bell, 2015).

In relation to authenticity, arguing for the choice of the selection participants is a challenging aspect, especially when relying on a judgmental sampling approach (Bryman & Bell, 2015). There might be a lack of perceived transparency and fairness in the criteria associated with the non-probability quota sampling (Bryman & Bell, 2015). However, in our specific case, the participants have been selected in accordance with a fixed selection criteria and reasons related to our research purpose.

When discussing matters of perceived trustworthiness, Lincoln and Guba (1985), explore the necessity of replacing the criteria of quantitative research - internal validity, external validity, reliability and objectivity, with four equivalent criteria which would be the equivalent in the qualitative domain - namely *transferability, credibility, dependability and confirmability*. Thus,

not only to increment the quality and the creativity but also, to provide motivation for the adoption of the selected research strategy, these four fundamental aspects need to be taken in consideration.

Firstly, transferability and credibility are the main limitations which are represented by the incorporation of only two different contexts - CSKA Sofia and Malmö FF. Although they represent two valuable examples at the time of our research, they did not encapsulate the complete worldwide fandom observation regards stadium *naming rights* practices. Furthermore, although considered an acceptable and appropriate number, the focus group and the semi-structured interviews resulted in a total of 11 different responses. For this reason, the findings, further explain in the following chapter, cannot be generalise to a large extent, especially due to the fact cultural bias strongly influence the way people support their favourite team (Geertz, 1973). These two cases represent the pinnacle of football team's supporters in their respective countries, which leads the concerns to the lack of credibility to be justified by the uniqueness of the phenomenon studied. In addition, the adoption of a triangulation technique ensured that we, as researchers, have correctly depicted an adequate correspondence between the findings and the beliefs and feelings of the respondents involved (Bryman & Bell, 2015)

Secondly, when addressing the study's dependability there could be some objections in regard to possible interviewer bias, especially due to the exploratory nature of the study, which relied on direct observation through focus groups in combination with semi-structured interviews (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2009). It is possible for our academic peers to question and possibly object to the interpretation of the empirical material (Bryman & Bell, 2015). However, as mentioned in the previous chapters, we have adhered to a systematic process, especially due to our awareness of potential bias. The individual coding which was followed by a joint interpretation as a second stage is a vivid example of our conscious attempt of minimizing researcher bias. Even if it is difficult to assure that any personal values do not impact the entire study, the paper depicts a consistent strive towards the omission of strong individual viewpoints (Bryman & Bell, 2015). In addition, to reduce any possible biases, through the application of an "intersubjectivity" stance, we benefit from independently evaluated empirical material (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015). Moreover, as mentioned in the previous chapters, the focus groups and the semi-structured interviews were held both in Bulgarian and in English. Thus, linguistic concerns might be voiced (Bryman & Bell, 2015). However, as Bulgarian is a

native language of the translating author, there is low associated probability of a misleading translation.

Thirdly, with regards to confirmability of the data collection method, much has been written in the past years about the strengths and the weaknesses of using focus group and semi-structured interviews (Bryman & Bell, 2015; Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2009). The unwanted effect of social pressure or mistrust may be perceived as another obstacle to research (Bryman & Bell, 2015). Therefore, to avoid any misleading or inaccurate collection of data and to compensate their respective limitations, we have utilized multiple methods as a mean of improving the associated validity of the study. (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2009). Accordingly, we combined focus groups as well as an appropriate number of interviews to guarantee a sufficient degree of data triangulation (Bryman & Bell, 2015). However, as previously mentioned, our study does not fully incorporate external validity due to the subjective nature of the research topic. Nevertheless, the two contexts may be considered fundamental as they provided valuable insights into the logical reasoning of the spectators when discussing stadium *naming rights* initiatives and the associated implications of the *topophilic* factor.

In sum, we believe that the selected methodological framework benefited the quality of our research greatly. Despite the possible concerns listed above, all the predefined objectives of the study have been met. The flexible nature of our qualitative and inductive approach definitively overcame the illustrated shortcomings. In addition, the commitment to and the consideration of every ethical aspect enabled us to fulfil our purpose by answering the main research questions of our study.

5.   *Analysis - Discussion of Main Research Findings*

As illustrated throughout the preceding chapter, our research seeks to extract valuable insights from the rich empirical material which has been collected through two independent examples – namely CSKA Sofia and Malmö FF. As the two examples are representing the two extreme ends of the *naming rights* phenomenon – one residing in a stadium with a traditional name, whilst the other has struck a *naming rights* agreement approximately a decade ago.

Throughout this section, we will represent the two empirical streams independently due to the different contextual information which they illustrate. The two separate cases are comprised of general sub-themes which were identified during the hermeneutic analysis of the empirical material gathered through the focus groups and semi-structured interviews. The different sub-themes, in turn, form more abstract concepts which are fundamentally related to two dichotomies presented in the preceding literature review. In simpler terms, the empirical observations are related to more overarching phenomena in an effort to explain and make sense of the recent developments. Through this structure, we seek to highlight all relevant contextual information and to answer our two main research questions – how the fandom perceives stadium *naming rights* and which are the *specific resistance triggers*.

Each case will include distinctive and powerful quotes which represent a valuable contribution to our research. Moreover, the underlying motivations and implications of these comments will be linked to key theoretical elements and to the theoretical contribution which this paper seeks to provide. For the readers' convenience, we provide a short list of all participants and a summary of some relevant information for the two different contexts (Table 6-7).

Case	Participant	Abbreviation	Method	Taxonomy
CSKA Sofia	Ivan Manov	IM	Focus Group	Follower
CSKA Sofia	Nikolay Georgiev	NG	Focus Group	Supporter
CSKA Sofia	Alexander Haralampiev	AH	Focus Group	Flâneur
CSKA Sofia	Nikola Darpatov	ND	Focus Group	Fan
CSKA Sofia	Lyubomir Antonov	LA	Interview	Fan

Table 6: Summary of participant initials and classification (CSKA Sofia)

Case	Participant	Abbreviation	Method	Taxonomy
Malmö FF	Pontus Liljenberg	PL	Interview	Fan
Malmö FF	Martin Olsson	MO	Interview	Supporter
Malmö FF	Ola Olsson	OO	Focus Group	Follower
Malmö FF	Emil Persson	EP	Focus Group	Supporter
Malmö FF	Jacob Lindblad	JL	Focus Group	Flâneur
Malmö FF	Max Wiman	MW	Focus Group	Fan

Table 7: Summary of participant initials and classification (Malmö FF)

The first focus group took place on the 2nd of April, a Sunday, at the central stand of the "Bulgarska Armiya" stadium. The focus group was comprised of four CSKA Sofia supporters which were purposefully selected during the research design stage. The commitment of the individuals was nothing short of impressive, since they agreed to spend a few hours of their spare time in order to provide us with a passionate and insightful representation of their views regarding essential elements of the general *naming rights* discussion.

These elements, in conjunction with a structured and in-depth hermeneutic analysis, resulted in the formulation of different *themes* which comprise the main points of consideration when discussing the evolving attitude towards *stadium naming practices*. Most importantly, throughout the description and analysis of each theme, our paper seeks to highlight which are the *potential triggers of resistance towards a potential stadium renaming*. As a next step, we will link these agitation sparks to the developed theoretical framework. As a result, our analysis will answer the two main research questions by providing a more profound understanding of *how specific categories of spectators perceive the naming rights trend and why they would, in some cases, object to it.* In addition, through a development of the four specific taxonomies – namely *"Supporters", "Fans", "Followers" and "Flâneurs"* – we strive to develop the knowledge around what leads to the constitution of different trigger for the various taxonomies.

5.1 Club Heritage and Geographical Anchoring – The Backbone of an Authentic Identity

The results of our empirical analysis unveiled two main themes which ultimately enable our paper to answer the main research questions. The first one, namely *matters of the authentic identity* allow for a profound understanding of which are the pure and sacred symbols of the club identity. That, in turn, allows for us to understand how the different spectators perceive the phenomenon of stadium renaming through the prism of preserving *heritage*. As a second stage of our analysis, through the coded empirical material, we seek to illustrate the sub-themes which assist with understanding how these symbols are perceived by the fandom and what are the limitations when considering *authenticity* preservation.

Heritage

The first and one of the most fundamental sub-themes which arose from our research analysis was the concept of *heritage*. As highlighted in the theoretical framework of this paper, the cultural identity of the club is an essential element in regard to preserving the *authentic* appearance (Peterson, 2005). Interestingly, despite their different background and relationship with the club, all four participants did highlight the importance of the club traditions. For example, in the words of Ivan Manov ("IM)":

> *"For me CSKA was a way of upbringing. There is a strong link between the military values and the way we are now. We are so different from all the other supporters"*

Another participant, Nikolay Georgiev ("NG") further supports this views by adding *"...to support this club, you need to share a set of values which go with it ..."*. These two quotes represent an important initial observation – being a part of the fandom is not to be taken for granted. As addressed by Dionisio, Leal and Moutinho (2008), there are certain rules which are to be followed if one wants to become a part of the tribal community. In order to receive recognition and be accepted within the society, the individual needs to follow an unwritten code of conduct which demonstrates the respect for the other members and for the symbols and rituals which are perceived as sacred. Through these activities the tribe, or in this specific case the fandom, is differentiating itself from its rivals. This is an important process, especially in the context of competitive sports since within this domain strength is achieved through unity (Fleming, Martin, Hughes & Zinn, 2009).

Within the context of CSKA Sofia, a club with a military background, the feeling of togetherness is powerful and omnipresent. Lyubomir Antonov ("LA"), in his interview, powerfully illustrates the strong social bond between the participating members of the tribe. More specifically, he does so by unveiling the symbolic importance of the stadium and the "Bulgarska Armiya" name in particular:

> LA: "The name of the stadium … To be fair if I think about it I associate it with the army – the people which sit next to you are your family. When you go there regardless of the score, the people next to you feel like family. When we score I always hug the people around me – whether I know them or not. It's a unique feeling since people return the same. Then you realize you all support the same cause and you know why you are there. And I am sure that if I was a bit more talkative, I would have made even more friends there (with a feeling of regret)"

The reciprocity of emotions is a characterizing element of a *pure and authentic community* which shows appreciation for both the clubs traditions and the surrounding members (Brick, 2000). Another intriguing notion which Lyubomir introduces is the element of physical interaction. Despite not being familiar with all surrounding community members, he perceives the act of embracing as a suitable and bonding activity in times of celebration, especially due to its reciprocal nature (Fromme, Jaynes, Taylor, Hanold, Daniell, Rountree & Fromme 1989). Lyubomir adds another interesting perspective of the stadiums' function – not only as a location in which the rituals take place, but also the backbone of the community – a place where a spectator is able to forge institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992).

In line with his recollection of feelings experienced at the stadium, Lyubomir shares his first memories of visiting the stadium. His story allows for an intriguing finding to surface – the element of protection and security – which is widely associated with the concept of home and the concept of tribal belonging (Boyd, 2000; Dionisio, Leal & Moutinho 2008):

> LA: "I remember that when it was raining really hard most people stayed at their seats, but there were people like me and my friends which went to top rows to hide under the trees. It was our first game and we just hid under the trees. Otherwise my first memory from the actual stadium was that it was in a really terrible condition"

In his vulnerable state, as a 12-year old in a completely new environment, Lyubomir found shelter in the stadium during harsh weather conditions. In his recollection, it may be interpreted that the trees represent the protective element, despite the vivid memory of the facility's poor condition. His words allow for another striking parallel to be drawn – as in most tribal communities, the elders are responsible for the nurturing and safeguarding of the younger members. In this case, the established and adult members of the fandom did resist the harsh conditions, in order to allow for the younger spectators to find shelter. This behaviour is closely linked to another interesting observation made during CSKA's focus group. The members demonstrated that they do not see participation as their only duty – throughout the discussion there is a powerful emphasis on extending the traditions in the future and on the thought of future generations integration within the fandom:

> AH: "It is our duty to extend those traditions"; "… it's up to us to preserve our community…"

> IM: "My grandfather was a CSKA fan. My father brought me here and to be fair, I can't wait to have children just so I can buy a membership card for them"

> NG: "That is why only the clubs with loyal fans survive – if you do not have the critical mass of supporters behind you, there is nothing to remain constant when the winds of change start blowing. And supporters will do their part by every mean possible …"

In the context of the focus group conversation, these findings are hardly surprising. During the initial familiarization step of the discussion, two of the group members spoke fondly of their first moments associated with the club – and with their fathers. This represents yet another example of the *authentic* community and its trans-generational *heritage*. The purity of the paternal figure plays a focal part in this sacred initiation process (Douglas, 1966). Moreover, this may be interpreted as a point of intersection between the personal and the club identity – by being introduced to the community, the individual informally adheres to an established value system. As Wattanasuwan and Elliott (1999) argue, individuals create their identities through consumption and brands in particular. However, the issue stemming from this is that as consumers, individuals rarely demonstrate a long-term dedication. In other words, each individual decision is made in favour of the most short-term needs and is based on a value-for-money consideration (Sproles & Kendall, 1986). In turn, it may be argued that this volatility

plays a negative role when trying to establish constant and durable personality traits. Therefore, by drawing inspiration from Tversky and Kahneman's (1974) *anchoring theory*, communities seek to create, and maintain, symbols and affiliations which may be perceived as an *anchoring point* for its adolescent members. Due to the extraordinary loyalty associated with the supporter culture, becoming part of the fandom often fortifies the relationship towards the family and the local region through inheriting an established value system (Hognestad, 2012).

In regard to the identification of *anchoring symbols*, there is a vivid sentiment towards the stadium, fondly referred to as "Armiyata" or "The Army" *(please refer to Appendix 3)*. The affectionate relationship is pointed out by all members of the focus group, regardless of their spectator taxonomy, however Nikolay's words are particularly compelling:

> NG: *"The Army has been and always will be our home. As the others mentioned, not all the biggest games have taken place at our stadium, but it is the one which preserves the true spirit of our team and its supporters"*

The thoughts represented above firmly confirm that in the context of modern football, the stadium is clearly overlapping with the concept of home – a place where the fandom feels a sense of protection, appreciation and belonging. Also, Nikolay unveils the symbolic importance of the stadium – it safeguards the identity and spirit of the club within its soil. A true *anchoring element* which derives its power from its traditional location – a constant element in an otherwise rapidly changing and increasingly commercialized world. As illustrated through the selected quotes, the element of home is extremely powerful among all different types of supporters. The language used by the participants also underlines the emotional attachment towards the home stadium – all comments described the feelings which the individuals associate with their physical presence. Lyubomirs' choice of words is intriguing since in addition to his adolescent exposure to the club, he introduces another important facet – the perceived sanctity of the stadium:

> LA: *"I grew up at that stadium and it was the first stadium I attended – this is why I feel it like a temple. I don't think I will ever feel the same way at any other stadium"*

By referring to "Bulgarska Armiya" as a temple, Lyubomir is further reinforcing studies which have extensively studied the similarities between religion and football (Percy & Taylor, 1997). A place in which the religious followers come to worship and honour God by participating in a

series of rituals and by showing their respect to sacred symbols (Belk, Wallendorf & Sherry, 1989). Therefore, the temple may be perceived as the symbolic home for the religious followers, as the stadium is for the fandom– a place of safety, community and most importantly – a location in which the sacred rituals take place. As Douglas (1966) argues, these processes are generally linked to purification practices – and anything which does not reside within the community may be believed to have a polluting effect since it may be seen as "matter out of place". Therefore, it may be argued that building credibility among the fandom is of pivotal importance for external elements, including sponsors.

By linking the stadium to his childhood, which is generally characterized by a notion of innocence, Lyubomir provides a powerful image of purity associated with the stadium (Douglas, 1966). Taking this a step further, the memories of his personal success *("Also, at the Army I won the first medals in my life. I was doing relay races")* are closely connected to the identity of the community. This is a clear depiction of the intersection between the personal and the group identity – the individual recollects of personal successes, which are strongly related to the *heritage* and traditions of the club and its stadium *(IM: "Because you come here and you see the constant ambition for the first place")*.

In addition to the facility, substantial importance is attached to the actual name of the stadium. The participants unanimously agreed that the name, "Bulgarska Armiya", has an importance due to its formal link with the military *heritage* of the club *(AH: "The name alone provides you with so much energy"; NG: "The name is a reference to our traditions and such is an important link to the history which we seek to preserve")*. Nikola Darpatov on the other hand remains silent when the discussion concerning the stadium name arises. Interestingly enough, there is a reason for his refrain as it surfaces later on in the conversation when he agrees that the *"stadium name is just a formality",* because the community will continue to use the traditional name, regardless of any renaming activity. This is an intriguing observation, since it depicts the "Fan" profile - a hot and consumerist relationship to the club – and links it to a *coping* mechanism (Giulianotti, 2002). The lack of a strong resistance is largely explained by Woisetschläger, Haselhoff and Backhaus': *"Fans' resistance to naming rights sponsorships: Why stadium names remain the same for fans"* (2014). In their studies, the authors point out that this is a *coping mechanism* for fans which, in their own way, boycott the new sponsored name by refusing to use the formal name. Interestingly, Malmö FF's empirical dataset illustrated an identical attitude:

MO: "Unfortunately, that's the only bad thing ... the name (the voice tone expresses disappointment). But really, the important thing is that all the supporters kept together afterwards and said that when we talk about the stadium we will never say Swedbank Stadium but always Nya Malmö Stadion (English: New Malmö Stadium). To be honest, I don't know anyone who normally uses that name, I think, it's only the official club who uses it"

Despite Martin's evident disapproval of the new stadium name, it is clear that there is no intention of active resistance against that decision. The community has accepted, although reluctantly, the new sponsor and has employed a *coping mechanism as a reaction* – keeping the traditional name alive during intra-group verbal communication. It is evident that in this case the community is seen as the protector of the *heritage*, while the club has succumbed to the temptations of lucrative sponsorship. By refusing to address their home with its newly acquired corporate name, Malmö FF's fandom seeks to *retain the sanctity* of their arena, however by not actively resisting against it – the community indirectly provides consent for the clubs commercially driven decision making.

This presents an important finding, as it clearly highlights an alignment between both contexts – CSKA's hypothetical discussion and the actual post-renaming process which took place in Malmö FF. The communities illustrate reluctance in regard to the adoption of a new name, but instead of actively resisting it, both are likely to respond by ignoring the formalities. While some of the participants are firm in their views that the name of the facility has an importance, Ivan Manov ("IM") introduces a fundamental new facet of the stadiums' characteristics – the location.

Location & Topophilic Sentiments

When asked to elaborate on whether the stadium name has a symbolic importance Ivan Manov, in comparison with his general activity, is unusually indecisive. He does not rule out the specific charge behind "Bulgarska Armiya", however he states that:

"For me it is about the location. You see it when the opposition bus parks in front of the stadium. They go out on the field and start passing the ball backwards. The actual name might have an impact ... In any case, I really like the fact our stadium

is still named "Bulgarska Armiya" (grinning proudly). And whether this name impacts other people – I don't know ... For me the location is magnetic"

Ivan goes on to describe, in detail, which are the features which make the specific location so memorable and unique:

"... there is no better feeling to come to your stand and seeing the trees which surround the stadium (uses hand gestures to point at the nature which surrounds the stadium) especially when it's spring ... There is no better feeling than this one ..."

As the stadium represents the location which allows for the spectators to participate within their self-creation and identification, it may be assumed that it plays an important factor into the ritualistic experience of each spectator. The landscape and the nature, which have remained identical over decades, allow the actors to re-engage in fond memories while creating new ones. This may be perceived as an important finding, since apart from the actual facility, the surrounding environment also has an *anchoring influence* on the spectators. For CSKA fans, few things have remained constant over the years, but the magnetism surrounding the stadium is one of them and it represents an important element of the club identity. The physical environment, although perceived differently depending on the individuals cultural and aesthetic capital, provides common ground for the different generations of spectators (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). As an example, Ivan's emotional description of the surrounding environment was quickly supported by the other participants in the focus group. Building on Ivan's comments, Nikola introduces another relevant element of our findings – *geographical location as a source of localist pride*. As originally presented by Hopcraft (1968), football supporters have a strong affiliation with sentiments of localism and within the context of regional rivalry – thus, it may be argued that the specific topology of the stadium place a key role:

ND: "Yes, it does have that atmosphere. It's one thing to go to a stadium somewhere in the outskirts of a city [...] where the actual location has no charisma"

Interestingly, both Nikola and Ivan bring up terms such as magnetic location and location charisma. In regard to the ongoing discussion in the academic domain, this facet may be perceived as a new and intriguing addition, since it has not been an object of scholarly interest yet. Their perception of the actual facility is of secondary importance – in the context of the discussion the area of the stadium is closely linked to a sentiment of superiority when compared

with the local rivals. The importance of the geographical positioning is clearly intertwined with matters of *heritage* and is in line with the general intentions of our paper. We seek to develop the neglected, but as seen in this case, important influence of the *topophilic* factor. In sum, the facility's infrastructure and the stadium name remain essential, however the geographical location and physical surrounding warrant further scholarly attention.

In relation to the stadiums' condition, and the comfort which it may offer to visiting spectators, another interesting observation may be observed. Nikola and Ivan acknowledge the fact that a renovation would improve the likelihood of attractive a wider audience, however Nikolay strongly opposes the idea of prioritizing comfort. His words unveil an existing internal tension within the fandom and are easily explained by the existing Giulianotti matrix (2002). The main drivers for participation in the rituals are different, as within the religious parallel constructed by Percy and Taylor (1997). There are different types of dedication among the religious followers and the same holds true for the fandom. While the more dedicated believers seek a more profound and meaningful connection with their faith, some individuals attend religious events simply in order to pursue social interaction and to reaffirm their presence within the community (Roof & Hoge, 1980). Nikolay's words are a fundamental milestone in the discussion since apart from revealing the first sign of internal tension among the different categories of supporters they, more importantly, reveal the first element of distinctive resistance – moving the stadium to a new location is a completely unacceptable option:

> NG: "This would be hard to digest because it is not about the actual facility, it is about the ground and the location. The soil underneath keeps the emotions and memories which have been celebrated and shared for generations back "

The *anchoring effect* of the stadium is clearly depicted by his choice of words – the soil on which the facility rests represents the genetic memory of the club and of generations supporters. His feelings are shared by the remaining participants in CSKA Sofia's focus group, but the same bond, according to Martin Olsson, is present among Malmö FF's fandom. The area in which the club has its roots has different manifestations and, in this example, it has resulted in various streets, such as "Eric Persons Väg", named after important persons which represent the teams' *heritage*. This may be perceived as a ritual of physical demarcation of soil which is claimed by and for the community. Therefore, it may be assumed that the co-creation of the geographical space plays an important role into the developing sentiment of the fandom – by building references to the club, the community reinforces its sense of cultural belonging.

Most intriguingly, there is a discrepancy in the findings collected through the Malmö FF's empirical dataset. Unlike the individual interviews, which illustrate extreme dissatisfaction at the prospect of stadium relocation, the focus group participants did not share the feeling of reluctance. On the contrary – by proudly building on their sense of localist pride, they clearly point out their attitude of superiority due to the lack of an inner city rival:

> EP: "Because Malmö FF is the entire Malmö (OO: Yes, definitely), it's not like one of those cities where you have two or more big rivals. It doesn't matter where you are, everything is sky blue and white"

This provides solid ground for an interesting and valuable interpretation – the *topophilic* importance is particularly powerful and extensively expressed when clubs lie in close geographical proximity with their competitors. In other words, CSKA Sofia fans represent a greater degree of affection towards their location in the city, due to the arch rival teams which are also residing within Sofia. On the contrary, Malmö FF's fandom does not have an inner city rival, thus it may be argued that the lack of such has a diminishing effect on the localist feelings which, in turn, results in a reduced level of *topophilia*.

The different degree of sensitivity associated with the geographical exclusivity illustrates another interesting parallel with the works of Dionisio, Leal and Moutinho (2008). It may be interpreted that the tribal nature of the community is fully represented when the status or the claimed territory is at risk. As a reactive mechanism, the community then consolidates and is actively responding to the threat. Within the specific empirical phenomenon, clubs which have one or more local rivals, such as CSKA Sofia, have a more vivid manifestation of the their *topophilic* sentiment. By presenting profound and affectionate feelings, the fandom seeks to demarcate territory. The strong emotional attachment, in turn, contributes to the development of the perceived element of purity (Douglas, 1966). Conversely, Malmö FF illustrates a slightly more pragmatic and detached relationship with the home ground due to lack of a strongly represented local rival. There is no external body which may threaten the integrity of the fandom, thus the reaction is expressed in a more passive way.

In addition to the partial similarities which both cases provide in this example, there is further misalignment among the fans when it comes to the prioritization of comfort. Both Pontus Liljenberg ("PL") and Martin Olsson ("MO") emphasize on the importance of the comfort and physical proximity to the pitch:

PL: "...since they introduced the new stadium, you have a more intense atmosphere, you feel closer to the pitch and I think in some ways the new stadium is better than the old one "

MO: "I think most of the active supporters like the new one, cause the facility of the old one is not got so good. For example, you can't watch the game, the acoustics, (the sound) when you sing and scream is much better now and you are much closer to the field "

Therefore, this may be identified as clear distinction between the two contexts. Although belonging to different categories, Malmö FF participants generally prioritize the physical, infrastructural advantages of the new stadium. On the contrary, CSKA Sofia's participants demonstrated more fondness towards the *heritage* of the stadium, despite acknowledging the importance of the infrastructural condition. The profile of both fandoms' is an important consideration within the scope of the research, since the perception of *authenticity* plays a pivotal role in how the stadium *naming rights* are perceived. By taking this a step further, we may conclude that CSKA Sofia's fanbase is more likely to object since it demonstrates a warmer, more dedicated relation to the club *heritage*, while Malmö FF's fandom illustrates a prevailing preference for short-term success *(PL: "... if there is a chance for us to reach the final stage of the Champions League, build a f*cking new stadium and let's go there")*. This presents an important observation since it highlights the predominantly thick relationship of one community over the other (Giulianotti, 2002).

Although this is an example of the differences between the two contexts, to a large extent there is consensus when addressing the particular element of the *heritage* – namely the geographical positioning of the club. Even when presenting access to a new and modern facility, this action is utterly unacceptable and is relevant since it demarcates the limits of commercialization accommodation:

IM: "I would prefer to keep the location here. Then I would prefer to stay at this old facility instead of moving to a modern one"; "What we won't accept is to change the location"

NG: "Location is a part of our identity. It is not a social class thing, but we feel superior. There is a sense of local pride with our stadiums' location"; "It is like a

parallel universe – it's in the centre of a busy, busy city and yet again you feel like you are in a temple"

PL: "I think it is important to keep the Arena where it is, no matter if you build a new one"

Nikolay's position is in line with the profile which is based on the Giulianotti (2002) matrix – the "Supporters" is expected to demonstrate a firm position in favour of preserving the traditional values and the community. However, his selection of words is intriguing since similarly to Lyubomir, he makes a parallel between the stadium and a place of worship. As illustrated through the studies by Percy and Taylor (1997) and by the development of the element of sacred symbolism by Belk, Wallendorf and Sherry (1989) – it is evident that for the "Supporters" profile there is a strong link between religious following and dedication to the football club. Moreover, understanding and appreciating the sanctity of the location is not intended for the general public but just for the fandom (Belk, Wallendorf & Sherry, 1989).

Importantly, Nikolay also goes on to complete the second element of *anchoring* – in conjunction with the actual community, the stadium has symbolic importance as the one constant element in times of persistent change. In one of the most powerful quotes of the discussion, he shares his thoughts on why the stadium constitutes such an important fragment of the club identity:

NG: "And the stadium has been the one constant thing in all these transformations. It has provided the stability which the community needed in order to preserve and extend our traditions"; "This is where the tree has its roots. It's not the plastic seat or the goal posts, this is where the roots are"

His resonating words drew a distinctive line between the facility and the actual ground in which the club identity is rooted in. Apart from the *anchoring effect*, developed in the *Heritage* sub-theme, Nikolay's words clearly indicate that even the most dedicated and traditional spectators are unlikely to object to a new facility, as long as the geographical positioning of the club remains intact. Despite his general disapproval of the *naming rights* phenomenon, he dismisses the possibility of a relocation, while he does not fully rule out a new name. In other words, this statement makes a distinct separation between a passive disapproval, as a form of resistance, and a clear warning for active and dedicated rejection of the prospect of relocation. As presented earlier on in the sub-theme, the location constitutes the backbone of the *authentic identity* and

no negotiation appears to be remotely acceptable for any of the supporter classes, in either context. The strong link between the *heritage* and the location is evident and is an important consideration which needs to be assessed when initiating exploratory research regarding the stadium *naming rights*. Another fundamental aspect which merits examination is the underlying attitudes towards general commercialization, especially when related to the concept of home.

5.2   The Evolving Attitudes Towards Commercialization – Still a Trigger for Resistance?

The second theme which was observed provides an insight into which are the possible *triggers behind a fandoms' resistance*. Building on the existing literature, which illustrates that there is a history of committed resistance, we seek to understand whether those sentiments are still present and if so – to what extent. Understanding the evolution of the resistance element allows for our research to investigate the three sub-themes which arose from our analysis – namely the general *attitudes towards commercialization, the attitudes towards stadium naming rights* in particular and, last but not least, at *the stadium-sponsor fit.*

A string of scholarly work has proven that there has been strong negative perception of the increasing element of commercialization in modern football. Duke (2002) and Numerato (2015), in their publications, have provided the academic community with a clear and resounding summary of the resistance phenomenon. The authors present findings from two different contexts and two different territories which unveil a cross-national, cross-cultural phenomenon. By studying large scale fandom reactions in England and in Italy respectively, Duke (2002) and Numerato (2015) concur that there is an element of strong opposition between local traditions and the McDonaldization of football and a strong "against modern football" movement.

Therefore, through collecting our empirical material in two separate territories we seek to retain the objectivity of our contribution, while trying to assess whether the resistance element is still as formidable or if there is a "fade-away" effect which may be observed. The focus groups and interviews were addressing club-specific matters and general attitudes towards commercialization, which allows for our analysis to draw a line between the objective thoughts and the emotionally-driven, biased perceptions of our participants.

Attitudes Towards Commercialization

As per the preliminary design of the data collection, our research seeks to unveil whether the tolerance levels in regard to commercialization practices differ per each spectator taxonomy. In Giulianotti's matrix, the "Fans" and "Flâneurs" categories are anticipated to project a more commercially-friendly approach, while the more traditional minded "Supporters" and "Followers" often criticize such practices (Giulianotti, 2002). Interestingly, the findings of the focus group have posed a substantial number of surprising outcomes when addressing the aforementioned attitudes towards commodification. For example, Nikola Darpatov is very critical of the modern state of the game and indicates that *the lack of purity* is an issue, although he is representative of the consumerist side of Giulianotti's axis (Douglas, 1966). Strikingly, in this context the "Fans" and the "Followers" swap their roles. As Nikola is openly critical of the modernization of football, Ivan takes an opposing stance which is unusual, although intriguing, considering his traditionalist views. As common sense often dictates – context matters and this is particularly relevant in this sub-theme. Within the scope of CSKA Sofia's case, the recent years of financial troubles, which culminated in a year of third-league football due to a lack of a professional license, pose a tremendous impact on the way the respondents address the topic of commercialization. As mentioned by Ivan Manov ("IM"):

> *"If we were on the verge of bankruptcy (again) – I can't imagine that there would be a fan which would oppose a naming rights agreement which would stabilize us financially. Nobody would object. We would only do it if this 10 million would save us and the club can exist"*

Ivan's statement indicates two important elements – firstly, and as mentioned in the preceding paragraph, context matters. When the club has liquidity issues, the end goals justify the means. Protecting the clubs' existence becomes the ultimate goal for the community. Secondly, he introduces a concept which dominates a substantial part of the discussion – *the perceived trade-off*. In line with Ivan's words, the participants, with one exception, agree that a *naming rights agreement* would be acceptable, but only when fulfilling certain prerequisites and ultimately – only when presenting a fair exchange for the club and the community:

> *IM: "But this is the world we live in – you either adapt or you are expulsed. Being stuck in the memories does not help us always"; "It is cool to be authentic, but we need to adapt to the lifestyle"; "But it is time for the new to arrive"*

A similar context influenced Malmö FF when facing a decision regarding the potential branding of the new facility. Swedbank, the corporation which co-sponsored Malmö FF's new stadium, played an important role into the transition. Upon the construction end, Malmö FF had concerns in regard to its financial stability. This insecurity, coupled with the generated credibility through the investment within the construction, resulted in a favourable perception of Swedbank's profile. Interestingly, this interpretation may be drawn on findings from both contexts. Lyubomir Antonov and Max Wiman both highlight the important of corporate credibility within this context. In other words, it may be interpreted that the sponsor needs to prove an intention of good will before seeking financial interest from the investment.

When related to underlying motivations, the perception of the commercialization takes an intriguing shape. Although there is a general pattern of acceptance, there are varied factors which influence the respective reactions. For example, as in most his comments Ivan, who represents the "Follower", is preoccupied with matters of community preservation. He is preoccupied with the new generations and views the commercialization adaptation as a gesture of sacrifice for his future children. In other words, he would be willing to accommodate a bitter decision *("I agree it is hard ...")* with the ultimate goal of security the clubs' existence. On the other hand, Nikola Darpatov, as the "Fan", is adhering to a much more rational line of thought. As in most of his activity, he refrains from elaborating on his feelings and emotions and prefers to base his opinions on either historical precedents or facts. The distant relationship to the traditions and the openness to commercialization as a mean of securing superior athletic performance prevail. Nikolay Georgiev ("NG") is the sole focus group member who represents strong sense of idealism through which he opposes the idea of *stadium renaming* under any circumstances. Interestingly, as a result of his traditionalist mindset, Nikolay depicts a different dimension of *the trade-off*. Belk, Wallendorf and Sherry's (1989) and Douglas' work (1966) works assist with making sense of his reluctance – Nikolay's views the stadium as a *sacred symbol* and as such, it should not be contaminated by the marketplace's footprint:

> NG: *"It is all about finding the right balance between the two things. There are certain aspects of the club which should not be added to the marketplace. Some symbols cannot be priced and should not be up for sale. I understand why we would want to get a sponsorship for our kits or the advertising areas around the stadium, but selling the name of the stadium sounds like a step too far for me"*

Applying Douglas' (1966) findings in this context illustrates that the process of commercialization has characteristics of an *impure action*, which ultimately pollutes the sanctity of the home. Nikolay, as the "Supporter", acknowledges the need for monetary support and this indicates that there has been consideration of what are the acceptable limits of securing the clubs existence, which adds further weight to his views. In other words, the idealistic standpoint is not bordering with the irrational – there is a clear understanding of the need to secure funding, however his disagreement stems from the actual method of doing so. In contrast, most of the other focus group members present a less idealistic, a predominantly pragmatic approach to the *naming rights* phenomenon. When Nikolay describes the stadium name pricing process as "degrading", Nikola Darpatov replies that *"the home has a price ..."*. Contrary to some of the fundamental works in the domain, for example *Boyds': "Selling home: Corporate stadium names and the destruction of commemoration"* (2000), most of the participants do not identify the commercialization of the home as a profane practice. This is a surprising, yet intriguing finding, since the increasing number of *naming rights agreements* turns this process into an ordinary and common tool for corporations to improve their corporate visibility:

> AH: *"You know what, Georgi, if it wasn't for the Internet and all the social media that keeps us informed about what happens in the world probably we would've reacted with a lot more anger and extremism. We see that now we are a part of a global community and everyone is doing this"*

The comment above is clearly in-line with the typical "Flâneurs" characteristics, especially due to the constant interest in the peers and the surrounding environment (Giulianotti, 2002). However, there is a certain degree of contradiction with some flagship research since the ordinary depicts the profane, while the sacred is characterized by the unique, the extraordinary (Belk, Wallendorf & Sherry, 1989). Therefore, as a result of this paradox, it may be concluded that the understanding of what constitutes a fair exchange, or *trade-off*, and its perception differs for the different spectator categories. On one hand, matters of identity are majorly important for the "Supporters", since they represent the traditionalist mindset. The main objective of this category is to ensure the preservation of the *authentic* nature of the club identity for the future generations. On the other hand, the increasing comfort at the facility is more important for the "Fans".

The difference in opinions may be largely explained by the different time frame which is presented by Richard Giulianotti's matrix (2002). The "Supporters" have a long-term, unconditional affiliation with the club and its identity, while the "Fans" present a constant strive for short-term success and accompanying comfort. Therefore, both spectator profiles illustrate the same goal – bringing more supporters to the stadium, however, they differ in the actual means of achieving this goal. This is largely intertwined with the value system of both since, as previously illustrated, the importance of safeguarding *authenticity* is of greater importance for the "Supporters". This striking opposition is an example of the fact that the *attitudes towards commercialization* constitute an important element for both clubs and corporations. The fully expanded summary of practical implications is provided in a separate section later on in the paper.

Naming Rights

In addition to the selection of practically relevant findings, a module of the focus group discussion specifically addressed the focus group participants' perception of the *stadium naming rights* phenomenon in particular. In line with the observations from the previous sub-theme, all participants appeared to be in agreement, apart from the "Supporter" representatives who were dismissive and critical towards this increasingly popular sponsorship practice.

The findings linked to the *naming rights* phenomenon are particularly interesting due to a number of paradoxes which they unveil. Firstly, it may be interpreted that *stadium renaming*, although clearly linked to the ever-growing degree of commercialization, appears to be a vital component of securing the clubs' existence. In other words, and as illustrated in the preceding section, only by accepting and participating in *naming rights* activities and other commercially oriented processes, clubs may secure their existence and safeguard the *heritage* and traditions for the next generations. Secondly, and fully in line with Woisetschläger, Haselhoff and Backhaus' (2014) findings, the focus group has unveiled that the community indicates its satisfaction of the fact that the traditional name is still present, and furthermore, a new name would be largely ignored among the fandom:

> IM: "I really like the fact our stadium is still named "Bulgarska Armiya" (grinning proudly) … It doesn't matter what is the official name of the stadium – for me this is the Army…"; "For us the name will stay the same"

> *ND: "… for the people the stadium will always remain as the Army"*

By largely ignoring the formal, sponsor-inspired name, the community's reaction may be perceived as an *act of coping, rather than resistance*. Instead of actively opposing the *stadium renaming*, the fandom rather prioritizes the extension of the traditional name throughout the community. By doing so, the spectators initiate a *process of coping* and demonstrate a rationally-inspired reaction which includes the balancing of pragmatic and emotional motivations. Excluding the Nikolay's viewpoint, there is a general sense of agreement. Alexander, as a "Flâneur", is particularly intriguing due to his demonstrated dismissive nature. The recent years of financial troubles have an apparent footprint on his rationale as he boldly claims that *"… we can't afford for a matter like this to stop us. We still have much bigger issues to deal with"*. In general, his thoughts may be adequately explained by Giulianotti's (2002) matrix which illustrates the limitations of the "Flâneur" association with the matters of *heritage*, including the perception of the home arena. By belittling the issue at hand, Alexander represents another facet of the *copings' passive nature*. In other parts of the discussion he has demonstrated a warmer relationship to the clubs' *authentic* identity, thus it may be argued that he seeks to marginalize the importance of the name as an example of another mean of adhering to a change which is, at least to some extent, unwelcome. This is largely supported by the observation that throughout the discussion there have been episodes in which his relationship has been manifested as much warmer than in this particular context. In sum, the aforementioned inconsistencies are hardly surprising considering the detached and very fluid attitudes of the "Flâneur".

Another compelling finding allows us to clearly differentiate actions which would turn a *naming rights agreement* into a completely unacceptable decision. As seen with Malmö FF and a number of other *stadium branding* projects, most sponsors tend to explore the possibility of sponsorship when club is considering a move to a new facility. Branding an existing facility appears to be an unattractive option for both the community and the corporations. Emil Persson clearly differentiates between the two way:

> *EP: "I think it's about emotions. Nobody had any emotions with the newly built stadium, it was new, It's like a baby. You don't have a name for a new born baby, but if you change the name of a 50 years old person, there would be drama"*

His words are particularly interesting since they signal an important link between the traditional facility and the perceived purity. By interpreting Douglas' work (1966), we are able to understand the underlying reason for that reluctance – the old and traditional stadium is a symbol of the romanticism, of an era which was not marked by extreme commercialization. As indicated by his choice of words, by renaming that stadium the club would aggravate the majority of its fandom. In that specific context, the commercial agenda is perceived as having an impure effect. However, when the sponsor-inspired name is related to the prospect of a new facility, and a new beginning, this action is met with significantly less reservation. The perceived *trade-off* is more favourable for the community, since there will be no sacrifice of existing *authenticity*. This example clearly illustrates the power of option framing, another theory developed by Tversky and Kahneman (1981). Their theory, later developed by several authors such as Biswas and Grau (2008), Levin, Gaeth, Schreiber and Lauriola (2002), and Park, Jun and MacInnis (2000), represents how the framing of certain decisions unveils a strong cognitive bias in the human brain. In simpler terms, the prospects of losing and not gaining yield very different outcomes and this fandoms' reaction is a clear example of this perception.

The concept of fair exchange is strongly represented throughout this theme at a whole. Once again, apart from the "Supporters" – who demonstrate a firm and idealistic standpoint, the other participants extensively elaborate on what would, in their view, constitute an acceptable *naming rights agreement*. An interesting development of the conversation is the introduction of internal and external tensions within the fandom. Although previously detected during the discussion of the comfort-seeking fans, at times this friction becomes a focal point of the discussion. On one hand, a parallel is being drawn between CSKA Sofia and its local rivals. On the other hand, the internal friction is introduced by Ivan Manov, who firmly believes that matters such as *stadium branding* should be solved by the clubs Management alone.

Firstly, rivalry among clubs, especially local ones, is an ever-present element of the football game and is deeply rooted into the supporter culture (Brick, 2000). A lot of the symbols are socially constructed and are based purely on opposition. In other words, "whatever our arch rivals stand for – we do not". Yet again, we are able to draw on the theory presented by Dionisio, Leal and Moutinho (2008) who develop this facet as a typical feature of the tribal community. An intrinsic element of constructing the sensation of unity is to place the group in opposition to a rival one and create a simulation of threat and competition. An interesting discussion

illustrates both the *trade-off* element and the relationship between CSKA Sofia and its local rival surfaces during the discussion:

> ND: *"...they rebranded the stadium and got nothing in return. I don't object to the stadium being renamed to Whatever Arena. But only when you receive an adequate return"*

The statement, although extremely critical, illustrates an important faced of the corporate behaviour in regard to the stadium name. The accusation of lack of character is entirely based on the oppositions' Management inability to show firm commitment. The mockery of the opponents *naming rights* acceptance is not rejected by all members – Ivan Manov expresses his views which unveil a stronger sentiment of understanding.

Secondly, Ivan introduces another element of internal tensions – namely between the fandom and the clubs Management. Initially, he is reluctant to discuss matters around the *naming rights* due to his view that:

> IM: *"In order to sole such matters, we have Club Management. For me this stadium will forever remain "Bulgarska Armiya". If they want they can make it Gazprom Arena, Mtel Arena or whatever, but we know that this is the Army and every game we will have a choreography about our home. For us the name will stay the same. But if the Management decides to reject a lucrative offer in order to preserve the name, that is entirely up to them…"*

Interestingly, Ivan is the only member which uses the discussion as a platform to voice his disapproval of the Management. While clearly differentiating between the owner, who is positively perceived by the fandom, and the Management – the "Follower" accuses the commercial directors later on in the discussion. His words pose an intriguing paradox – although Ivan is among the most engaged participants and followers in general, he feels that matters around the stadium name, which symbolizes his "second home", are to be solved by the Management which he views as incapable and unprofessional. In opposition, Nikolay Georgiev retains a firm and consistent opinion over matters regarding the stadiums' name and the club *heritage* in general. Stemming from his traditionalist mindset and his active participation within the community, he clearly differentiates between acceptable commercialization and assets which are not to be priced or integrated within the marketplace:

NG:" It is all about finding the right balance between the two things. There are certain aspects of the club which should not be added to the marketplace. Some symbols cannot be priced and should not be up for sale. I understand why we would want to get a sponsorship for our kits or the advertising areas around the stadium, but selling the name of the stadium sounds like a step too far for me"

Once again, an integration of the marketplace into the stadium's name is rejected, due to the associated impurity of the commercial agenda. His thoughts come across as more extreme, which may be associated with his deeply rooted idealistic value system, however they partially overlap with the rest of the participants. While Nikolay rejects any possibility of *naming rights* approval, the other participants illustrate *conditional acceptance* - a new stadium name would be acceptable, but only when the sponsoring company fits the value system of the club.

Sponsor-Stadium Fit

The fifth and final sub-theme of our research represents an important element which needs to be considered in order to ensure a resistance-free reaction from the fandom. In addition to the change of stadium location, which would constitute the first and most fundamental *trigger for potential resistance*, a misaligned *sponsor-stadium fit* represents the second possible reason for the community to object to a *naming rights* agreement.

As illustrated in the *Heritage* theme, CSKA Sofia's fandom is highly protective and appreciative of the clubs' traditions. Due to its military background, the club still has a strong sentiment towards regional politics. Therefore, political tensions, which are abundant across the Balkan region often influence the community's behaviour and identity (Weaver, 2016). It may do so in multiple ways, some of which are constructive, while are others are the foundation for *potential resistance to certain sponsors*. For example, CSKA's fandom has strong links to other regional teams with military background – especially with Partizan (Belgrade), Steaua (Bucharest) and PAOK *(please refer to Appendix 4).* The warm relationships have culminated in a number of shared events among the supporters of these teams. Another example of the political element is the tense relationship with another neighbouring country – Turkey. Moreover, this poor relationship has a spill-over effect and appears to negatively impact the perception of all Middle Eastern and Gulf investors. This friction is an example of a potential sponsor which could *trigger a negative reaction* from the fandom:

> IM: *"Our stadium is a symbol and we can't accept a Turkish company to become a part of that symbol through a stadium sponsorship agreement"; "There are certain companies which are against our value system and we can't accept as sponsors"*

> AH: *"At a first glance, I would imagine a large Wester multinational company. Alternatively, a local company with a good track record would be a good option. If it would be a Bulgarian company, probably not more than 4 or 5 would be able to afford such a sponsorship agreement"; "Powerful companies which are familiar and resonate, such as Adidas, Nike, Allianz, a bank perhaps – they might be acceptable. But if it's an Oriental investor – I would rather say no"*

The *sponsor-stadium fit* module of the discussion creates a certain sense of excitement within the "Flâneur" as he became increasingly engaged into the discussion once the profile of *potential sponsors* was under discussion. The remaining two participants were in agreement that a company may only be a suitable sponsor if it is in line with the value system of the club, and that "it can't be any company which could cause mixed or negative reactions from the supporters". Although both participants did not explicitly mention the corporate's nationality as a potential factor, their body language and the context of their statements were interpreted as being in accordance with the general direction of the conversation. Despite being intriguing and clearly relevant, the perceived chemistry between football clubs and potential sponsors is not within the scope of this research. Thus, a suggestion for further research could be to explore in specific detail the main aspects which are considered by the fandom when assessing and/or accepting new club sponsors.

Beyond simple disapproval, certain elements of the fandom might go beyond that and perceive the sponsorship as process with polluting the purity of the club identity:

> MO: *"Well I think we don't to have any company involved, at all! We just want to be pure Malmö and nothing else!"*

Martin is nothing short of passionate when he speaks about his wish to have a club which is completely isolated from the influences of the market. However, this is a thought which is complemented by a clear, self-aware feeling of utopia, as the interviewee himself realizes that this development is far from likely. Moreover, he and Emil Persson ("EP") represent the "Supporter" category which is the only one, at least partially, demonstrating a feeling of

nostalgia. Interestingly, Emil reflects upon the transition and shares that his sentiments of fading longing for the past. This presents an intriguing finding since interpreting his feelings indicates that nostalgia has an expiry date. The romantic times in which the club did not enjoy the spotlight of top-tier international football, but remained closer to its roots as an institution which was intertwined with the working-class values. As an informal leader of the fandom, Martin is generally preoccupied with matters of community which represented a significant share of our discussion. Moving away from his utopic wish to have a sponsor-free club onto a more realistic scenario in which the company has the backing of regional sponsors only. This, once again reinforces the strong notion of localism which has a large impact on our research (Brick, 2000). The reason behind presents a relevant and valuable contribution to our findings – when assessing the *sponsor-club fit*, one essential factor which needs to be addressed is the *corporate credibility*.

What is meant by the term is developing a relationship where the club and the community are prioritized, while the return on the corporate investment comes at a later stage. This may take place once the trust is established between the external party, in this case the sponsor, and the fandom (Lafferty, 2007). When this prerequisite is met, in the context of our study it may be argued that the overall profile of the company becomes of secondary importance. As an example, and opposing the findings from CSKA Sofia's focus group, Martin would be less agitated by having a local company *("I think some local companies, for example, Rörläggaren")* with a track record of sponsoring the club, although plumbing is far from a glamourous background. Therefore, we may conclude that the prestige associate with the profile of the sponsoring company is not of essential importance, what is more important and is seen in both contexts, is the relationship which the sponsor has developed over time. To confirm Martin's views, Lyubomir Antonov ("LA") has a similar opinion but he also introduces a new facet – the element of *sponsor loyalty* and exclusivity. In his interview, Lyubomir voices his dissatisfaction with the current sponsors of the club which, before sponsoring CSKA, had a long-lasting partnership with the arch rival team.

As one of the individuals who is particularly attached to the military traditions and the *heritage* of the club, the participant is particularly critical towards the demonstration of disloyalty, which he perceives as a cause of major concern and disappointment. The former affiliations with the disdained rivals, in his view, have a dirty and impure effect on the club symbol – namely the kit (Douglas, 1966). This is an interesting example, since Lyubomir believes that the shirt, much

like the stadium name, is an equally important fragment of the clubs' identity since it represents a symbol closely intertwined with the *heritage*. Unlike his peers who participated in the focus group, Lyubomir is not particularly interested in a specific sponsor profile, instead he insists on having a company which is pure – and in this context, corporate purity means the absence of relationships with competing teams. Interpreting Douglas' (1966) findings illustrates that by associating with competing tribes, sponsors bring reputational dirt along with their investment intentions. More importantly, the sponsor interest will never be perceived as well-intentioned due to the lack of corporate credibility. Once again, the importance of safeguarding an *authentic* and pure image proves to be an essential consideration prior to initiating a *stadium renaming agreement*. Otherwise clubs and sponsors might experience a powerful pushback from the traditionally-oriented part of the fandom.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, the two main themes, comprised of five sub-themes, which arose from the analysis of our empirical material, allow us to answer the main research questions and understand how the fandom perceives *stadium branding* practices. Moreover, we are able to pair certain behavioural patterns to the classifications developed by Giulianotti (2002).

In order to answer our first research question, related to *how spectators perceive the stadium naming rights agreements,* we found out that the spectator communities do not see a potential *stadium name change* as an excessively aggravating action. Firstly, as illustrated through both contexts, there appears to be a general consensus that it is not the facility, nor its name, which singlehandedly represents the *anchoring element* of a clubs' identity. Secondly, the *stadium branding* is perceived in an increasingly rationalized way – a necessary evil, which the community neutralizes through *coping mechanisms*. In their verbal communication the fandom preserves the traditional name of the home ground and largely ignores the formal and sponsor-oriented new name of a stadium. The representatives of the "Supporters" category, being the exception, are more critical and generally negative towards the trend of stadium *naming rights*, however they also participate in the same *coping* practices, alongside the other representatives of the fandom. Most surprisingly, the analysis of the Malmö FF case unveils an expected finding – that nostalgia has an expiry date. The longing for the old facility and the *authentic* home is a temporary sentiment, which may be managed through the implementation of a carefully thought out transition process.

By answering our second research question, our study provides even more concrete dimensions of the concept of resistance and, more specifically, the main triggers which could lead to a *naming wrong*. Despite the decreasing general level of criticism toward *stadium branding* practices, there are certain actions which may lead to a stronger and more extreme pushback from the fandom. The first resistance trigger which we unveiled indicates that there are certain sponsor traits which may aggravate the community. Although there is a greater variety of opinions on that matter, a general observation may be brought to light – a sponsor which does not fit the club *heritage* and identity is likely to be rejected. For example, in some cases previous affiliation with rival teams may be interpreted as corporate disloyalty, therefore the corporations' activities would be perceived as impure. As another example, sponsors originating from the Middle East are also linked to an overarching negative connotation and are

seen as ambassadors of the extreme commercialization, which is also unwelcome. The second clearly defined resistance trigger indicates that most representatives of the community perceive a new stadium name, when coupled with a new facility in a different location, as completely unacceptable. This finding confirms the credibility and relevance of our intended theoretical contribution – to provide additional understanding of the often-neglected concept of *topophilia*.

The newly-introduced concept proves to be particularly relevant in the scope of the research, since all participants agree that the "magnetism" of the stadium is generated by its geographical position and the soil which *"preserves the true spirit of the team and its supporters"*. In other words, the geographical location of the stadium has an *anchoring influence* – in times of constant change, the community is particularly protective of its symbols which, in turn, allow for the preservation of their roots. Most intriguingly, our findings illustrate that not only a stadium renaming may upset the fandom – a potential location change is a trigger for an even more committed and extreme reaction.

6.1 Theoretical Contribution

The concept of *topophilia* has been introduced and developed throughout our paper through the help of an extensive literature review and a robust theoretical framework, which highlighted the strong link with the *stadium naming rights* phenomenon. In line with the notable works from Boyd (2000) and Brick (2000), *topophilia* proves to be a particularly important addition to the existing academic dialogue. As unveiled by this research, the modern day fandom represents more powerful resistance towards the prospect of geographical relocation when compared to a potential stadium branding project. In turn, this may be perceived as a valuable addition to the *authenticity* domain, since it highlights that modern-day society is becoming increasingly detached from its roots and seeks to retain a firm and unconditional affiliation through the element of home. Although largely addressed in the original theory of Tversky and Kahneman (1974), our study proves that the *anchoring effect* is strongly represented within competitive sports and football in particular. We would also like to point out that our findings are not limited to this specific phenomenon – we firmly believe that our results may be transposed to different industries and examples, especially when there is a vividly depicted element of home.

This paper provides another contribution by advancing the ongoing discussion between Davis (2015) and Giulianotti (2002) within the academic domain. As extensively represented in the

literature review section of the article, there is an ongoing debate regarding whether the model development by the latter is adequately representing the different categories of spectators. After a thorough review and examination of the matrix, Davis (2015) criticises the shortcomings which may be observed when the classifications are tested in a particularly fluid environment. Although our research has benefited greatly from Giulianotti's insightful research, our findings are largely in-line with Davis' criticism. When using the model for sampling purposes, we assigned each participant to a specific category, in order to allow each spectator type to openly share their views and beliefs. However, upon finalizing the coding stage of our analysis, we encountered a great amount of inconsistency when trying to pair the participants with the characteristics which were logically meant to be represented. For example, when assessing underlying perceptions of *topophilia*, "Followers" seem to demonstrate an unusually thick relationship while "Fans", on the contrary, illustrate a cooler relationship which is generally unusual for the standard format of Giulianotti's matrix.

Therefore, within the specific example of stadium *naming rights*, we must concur that the model is rightfully criticised by Davis (2015). In sum, we would still advocate for the use of Giulianotti's theory, however we would strongly advise for consideration of the results – based on our analysis, we cannot confirm the generalizability of the four spectator categories.

6.2   Practical Implications

An increasing number of sports clubs are looking to strike *naming rights* agreements with sponsors, thus from a risk management perspective, it is important for club executives to understand and manage the potential resistance from their supporters and clients. Therefore, the findings of this study, on a practical note, provide several concise and relevant advices for both football clubs and corporations with an interest in pursuing stadium sponsorship. Furthermore, our findings can be useful for clubs planning to build or re-build their new arena, since we investigate to which extent the concept of *topophilia* can influence the different spectator taxonomies. In detail, the board of the club, but also the local municipalities, can benefit from identifying through our contribution how distinct perceptions within the fandom community could be affected by the change of location and what type of reaction may be anticipated.

By looking at the two parallel contexts, we illustrated how traditional, historical and long-established social values can lead to either similar or contrasting outcomes. Thus, by

considering the socio-cultural specifics, the club management can anticipate possible reactions. In other words, stadium *naming rights* agreements do not provide a one-size fits all solution and appropriate community due-diligence needs to be carried out prior to proceeding with sponsor negotiations. By doing so, corporations increase the likelihood of initiating a reciprocally beneficial agreement, which would result in a harmonious relationship between a passionate and loyal community and an ambitious enterprise.

In addition, our findings provide an enhanced understanding of the football fan communities and their evolving attitude towards *stadium branding* practices and this may be used as a starting point of the aforementioned due diligence. More specifically, our study contributes by pinpointing two different, but essential, elements – *the concept of topophilia* and the *sponsor-stadium fit*.

Firstly, when considering a new stadium name coupled with a new venue at a different geographical location, the club and the investors need to carefully assess the extent to which the community is preoccupied with matters of *heritage*. As mentioned above, this degree is largely related to socio-cultural specifics, thus this consideration needs to be processed on a case by case basis. A general finding which is of particular relevance is the varying degree of manifested *topophilia* – as proven by the parallel between CSKA Sofia and Malmö FF, there is a stronger sense of relocation sensitivity in cities which are home to two or more competing teams. Therefore, this insight needs to be taken in account when reviewing individual cases.

Secondly, as widely addressed in the *stadium-sponsor fit* sub-theme, there needs to be a degree of compatibility between the corporation and the football club. In case the company has an existing credibility within the community, this may assist with the acceptance of *stadium branding*. On the contrary, a history of previous collaboration with competing teams may have a negative effect, since the fandom which demonstrates a thicker relationship is likely to object due to the perceived polluting effect.

In sum, by following the guidelines provided above, we seek to assist managers in their effort to take sound investment decisions and actions when engaging in *stadium branding* practices. In turn, this would assist them in ensuring that the *naming agreements* do not trigger any unwanted reactions from the fandom. Also, as illustrated in the Malmö FF example – communication during a potential transition process is key. When renaming an existing facility, or when moving to a new venue, it is essential for the club to ensure a transparent process in

which key symbols are used as a mean of ensuring a sound transition into the new era of the club.

6.3   Limitations of the Study & Future Research Recommendations

To begin with, even though our research was able to answer both posed questions, we acknowledge that the study has a few possible limitations. The shortcomings of the study are mainly linked to the qualitative nature of the research. The choice to adopt a qualitative method proved to be appropriate as it did provide an answer to both research questions. In addition, the paper also managed to generate relevant insights regarding the underlying feelings and associations which actively influence the perception of stadium *naming rights* agreements. However, due to time and resource constraints, our study was comprised of only two different contexts - CSKA Sofia and Malmö FF. Therefore, we acknowledge the fact that it is not possible to generalise the knowledge produced to other contexts without the necessary adaptation. In view of that limitation, further research could focus on studying other contexts, especially in cases in which the teams were relocated as a part of the adoption of a new venue and an accompanying new stadium name.

As a piece of advice for future academic research, our reflective analysis highlighted data collection as the most effort intensive part of our study. Due to the limited time availability of the participants, the process of arranging the meeting venues at both stadiums presented a real challenge. However, despite the initial difficulties, all the objectives were achieved. Therefore, we would urge researchers to consider and plan well in advance.

As our study may be perceived as a relevant contribution to the *authenticity* domain, it allows for a more detailed understanding of each spectator category and its respective attitude towards commercialization. As a suggestion of potential improvement, we believe that the expanded spectators profile could also be implemented in other sectors, in an effort to investigate the potential link between the loss of perceived *authenticity* and the alienation from the home club.

Another potential shortcoming of this research is related to the sample size of our study. Due to both time and resource constraints, we have been able to collect sufficient amount empirical material. However, we acknowledge the fact that an even larger sample would provide a deeper

understanding of the observed phenomena. Since our discussion was based on spectators' verbal insights collected during focus groups and semi-structured interviews, the way findings were analysed and led to conclusions was influenced by the processes we adopted as researchers. This indicates that despite our effort to meet the confirmability criterion of research trustworthiness, we acknowledge the possibility of involuntarily influencing the research due to our own abilities and ways of thinking.

In conclusion, this study has provided an additional layer of understanding of the perceived elements of *authenticity*. Our empirical findings have unveiled causal effects of the post-modern fluidity – through *anchoring* mechanisms, communities seek to safeguard the few remaining ties to their roots and their *heritage*. As we have illustrated throughout the text, the specific empirical phenomenon depicts just this – *topophilia* represents the profound affection for the element of home and this notion is particularly powerful within the context of modern day football. More specifically, we have made an attempt of deciphering the underlying perceptions of our respondents while transposing them on the intersection point between commercialization and the home ground – the stadium and its name in particular. The majority of the respondents represent an evolving attitude – they perceive the commercialization of home as an increasingly acceptable phenomenon, especially when there is a harmonic *stadium-sponsor fit*. In opposition to the few fragments of the community, which represent active elements of *resistance*, the majority of the spectator categories develop passive *coping mechanisms* in order to manage the change process.

So, are we a consumption-driven society after all? The findings of our study suggest an affirmative answer to this fundamental question. Profanity, depicted by the ordinary and banal commercialization practices, has become an inevitable part of our world, even in domains which are typically characterized by elements of localist values and deeply rooted traditions. By absorbing the omnipresent commercialization, modern day society showcases an obsession with short-term gratification, although it is unclear as to whether *the associated trade-off* is fully understood.

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8. *Appendix*

Appendix 1 – Images of the Match Attended

Malmö VS. Örebro (01-05-2017)

CSKA Sofia VS- Ludogorets (01-04-2017)

Appendix 2 – Focus Group and Interview Topic Guide

Initial theoretical framework utilized during the focus group and the interviews & adapted to meet all spectators' language and understanding:

When was the first time have you been to a CSKA Sofia or Malmö FF game?

What are the first concrete memories from your visit to the stadium?

What do you think differentiate your team from other teams?

Do you think that the actual name influence the heritage and the traditions of the club?

How do you feel about the recent change within the sport? And specifically football?

Would you say now your team has become a more commercially-oriented club?

You have large corporation, which approaches the team and wants to rebrand the stadium for x amount. How would you feel about such a development?

If you had to choose a company which would be a suitable sponsor, would you go for a local company? Does the origin of the company influence your choice?

Imagine that a naming right agreement has been struck. How do you think the community will manage the internal tensions which might arise?

What about the geographical location of the stadium? Do you think is it embedded in the identity of the club?

Imagine the following situation – the club proposes a completely new and modern facility but in a different location in town, how would you feel about that?

Do you trust the management of your team?

Do you have a special place where you celebrate your successes?

Appendix 3 – Images illustrating the Emotional Attachment of the Spectators to the Stadium

"Stadium Bulgarska Armiya – our home!"

"The Army – our stronghold"

"An eternal symbol, to which I pledge my never ending love"

Appendix 4 – Images Illustrating the Links Between Different Fandom Communities

CSKA Sofia supporters showing their affiliation with Steaua